

# The Will and Other Stories

J.P. DAS

Translated by Ashok K. Mohanty

**The Will and Other Stories** The stories in this collection map the relation between writing and social power as they operate in a provincial milieu. With an unusual take on social relations and values, the stories are shot through with a fine sense of self-consciousness that is seemingly at odds with the self-effacing and objective manner in which they are written.

No social institution or practice escapes the master storyteller's gaze. Wry, clipped and clinical, these stories show J.P. Das at his ironic, debunking and self- reflective best.

Rs. 115

The sculpture reproduced on the endpaper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodhana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From: Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century A.D.

Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi

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by

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Sahitya Akademi

*The Will and Other Stories.* Selected short stories of J.P. Das translated from original Oriya by Ashok K. Mohanty. Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2007.

**SAHITYA AKADEMI**

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Cover : Biplab Kundu

ISBN : 978-81-260-2546-6

Rs. 115

Typeset & printed by Swastik Offset, Delhi-110 032

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# *Translator's Note*

This project took a lot longer than I had anticipated because of sundry reasons, not least of which is the physical distance between the author and the translator. While JP lives in Delhi, I am stationed at Berhampur. I am grateful to JP who took great pains to go through the draft and bring about substantial improvement. Personally, it was a pleasure for me to read the stories and translate them. The unexpected twists and turns in the stories will, I am sure, afford the reader the same gratification.

I am grateful to Dr Himansu S Mohapatra, Professor of English, Utkal University for writing the foreword to the book, as also his valuable suggestions. He has stood by me whenever I have needed him. Thanks buddy.

My thanks are also due to Prof. B.B. Kar, Professor of Oriya, Berhampur University without whose help this book would never have seen the light of the day.

I am grateful to the Sahitya Akademi for having reposed faith in me yet again.

**Ashok K. Mohanty**

# *Foreword: Writing Against Writing*

JP, the current toast of the literati for the Saraswati Samman he has recently won for his book of poems *Parikrama,* is also a prolific writer of prose. He occupies a special place in the history of thc Oriya short story, having helped to modernise it by expanding its horizon and by his unusual angles of approach. And what is more, he writes with an exquisite and delicate self-consciousness about himself as a writer standing on that perilous crossroads where fiction, illusion and truth meet and mingle. Does that mean, as it seems to do for many lesser writers, an automatic glorification of writing, or - and which is the obverse of it – a self-deprecatory view of the writer as a fabricator of lies? The answer, I think, is in the negative. For JP writing even when or, rather particularly because, it trades in the shadowy realm of the unreal and the imaginary has effects in the real world. This is because writing, whatever its specifiable aesthetic function, is also ideological in its role and implication. I shall in fact go so far as to say that JP is one among the few living contemporary Oriya writers who is astute in mapping the relations between writing and social power as they obtain in a provincial milieu.

This collection contains eleven stories of JP translated from the original Oriya into English by Ashok Mohanty. Except for one story none has been published before in English. Even this story, published as "The Interlude" in an earlier volume of translated Oriya stories titled *Ants, Ghosts*

*and Whispering Trees* (2003), is featured here as "All Alone." Since the translator's brief was to select for the present volume those among JP's stories previously unpublished in English, he probably may not have had much of a scope for a thematic organisation. Reading through the stories, however, one is astonished and intrigued to find at least five of the stories as having writing and writers as their subject matter. Out of the remaining six, three are woman-centred stories. One, a mystery story, is in a class by itself. The rest two are about the homeostasis of Oriya cultural life that JP is so adept at revealing.

The reader will probably tend to focus more on the three stories with women as protagonists, the mystery story - another potentially woman-centred story — where the Goddess Subhadra appears in the shape of a Japanese girl to restore to the narrator-protagonist the photographs of the Gods in Puri that had gone astray, and, the five stories that present a deglamourised picture of writing as a profession. The two stories dealing with a sycophantic and paralytic political culture are more predictable in their outcome. I shall, therefore, endeavour to cue the reader a little bit about the ones I have singled out.

The three woman-centred stories are about women wanting to take control of their lives and careers in ways that are both explicit and subtle. Furthermore, "All Alone" shows the protagonist, Ranjana, in the act of pleasuring herself in the privacy of her own room with a kind of abandon which not only recalls the Lawerentian distinction between the "warm hearted intimate and personal me" and the "social mental me", but also attempts the bold shifting of this area of traditional male preserve to the woman. "Eyes" plays on the uncanny resemblance between the yellow-hued

and mongoloid Subhadra, thought to be a deity of tribal descent, and a Japanese woman. I read it with the same kind of thrill with which I had read Marion Crawford's mystery story "The Upper Berth."

The five stories about writing and writers are indeed a *tour de force*. JP reflects in them on the fate of writing in a commodified culture. "The Patron Saint", with its tongue-in-cheek portrayal of Somprakash, the canonised author of a cult novel, is perhaps the finest story ever written about the magic of that commodity called writing which camouflages Somprakash's naked lust for wine, women and wealth. 'The Image" and "The Long Life of Poetry" represent a searing vision of the literary power politics that drives our culture. "The Progenitor" brings out the farcical game of power that is fought over the seemingly simple matter of turning a novel into a film. With the novel "Uttarayan" transformed into "Dakshinayan" in the televised version, the progenitor is finally ousted from his creation. The story is a spoof on a mad tendency within translation studies (emblematised through a character named Udbhrant which translates as crazy) that displaces local needs in favour of global wishes. Finally, if there is a story which shows that fiction is fatally entangled in life, it is "The Cast." The story is about coincidences between fiction and real life, leading to situations that are comic on the surface but dangerous underneath. JP has succeeded in putting Kafka (one thinks of *The Trial*) and Garcia Marquez (the inevitable reference here is to "The Chronicle of a Death Foretold") into the same broth.

And it is not as though these are disembodied insights. There are events galore in the stories for the reader to stay tuned. The reader can feel the power of the wry, clipped and

clinical style of the original in the translations and so will miss none of the power of JP's provocative art of storytelling for which he has justly been accoladed.

**Himansu S. Mohapatra**
**Professor of English, Utkal University**

# The Will

MANORAMA RAN her eyes over the paper yet again though she had read it many times earlier. Every word of the document was familiar to her by now: Know all men, I Shrimati Manorama, hereby declare that this is my last will and this will come into effect after my death. This declaration is being made for the benefit of the public in simple language and while I am in good health. It is being made of my own free will and while I am perfectly in my senses without any coaching, entreaty, fear, persuasion, encouragement, indication, allurement or misguidance from any quarter whatsoever. Since I have the following properties registered in my name, I wish that Shri/Shrimati ... shall be the sole owner of the said movable and immovable properties after my death and shall enjoy these for all time to come. Hence, I hereby declare Shri/Shrimati ... as the sole beneficiary and assignee of this will ... et cetera, et cetera.

When she had engaged a lawyer a long time back to draft the will, Manorama had thought that it was going to act as a shield for her defence if she had to live in this world. She was now convinced after having lived in this world and knowing its ways a little better that it could also be used as a weapon of offence. Manorama seemed to draw incalculable courage and strength as she caressed the paper in her palms.

An irrepressible anger used to take hold of Manorama when earlier she used to think of Shibnath, her husband. Shibnath had died leaving her in charge of two young children before giving her any kind of worldly happiness. At

that time, Manorama had felt that Shibnath had chosen the time of his death of his own will to take some kind of a revenge on her. None of her wishes at the time of marriage had been fulfilled in her life. Shibnath had gone away to the town to work leaving her in the village with his parents. They used to meet only when Shibnath came to the village on holidays. Life in the village was a punishment for Manorama who had spent her early years in the city. Apart from that, she had to continuously put up with the repressions and harassments of her parents-in-law. It was also not an enjoyable experience to give birth to two kids at a young age and be burdened with the concomitant responsibilities. In this manner, sorrow had taken hold of her life at a young age.

Initially, Manorama used to plead with Shibnath to take her to the town so that she could stay with him. Shibnath would insist on her staying behind in the village considering his meagre salary and his having to shoulder the responsibilities of his parents and younger brother. Shibnath lived in a rented house in the town and it was difficult for him to make both ends meet. He would send the major portion of his salary to his father every month. His father being a frugal man managed to save a little out of that to buy some land in the village in Shibnath's name. Shibnath talked about the future of the children to Manorama all the time, but Manorama never felt reassured by that. What was the point of dreaming about a comfortable future if the present was totally wasted amid wants and sorrows?

Manorama was worried about her children on another count. Shibnath's parents had total hold over the two children. Manorama often felt like a rank outsider. Her in-laws scolded her if she upbraided the children on any issue. The children had also become wayward and disobedient because of the constant pampering by the grandparents. Seeking relief from the discipline imposed on them by Manorama they look sides with their grandparents, and ignored their mother every time. Manorama thus lived like an unwelcome guest in her in-laws house.

Manorama had had a big fight with her mother-in-law that morning and when the news about Shibnath's illness reached them, she immediately left for the town with her children without discussing the matter with anyone. On reaching the town, Manorama's brother, who lived there, informed her that Shibnath had been moved to a hospital. Leaving her children in her brother's care, Manorama went straight to the hospital. She was to return only after Shibnath's death.

Shibnath, parents and brother had reached the town by then and were staying in his rented house. They took turn in visiting the hospital. Manorama had to take care of Shibnath at the hospital and on top of that she had to look after the comforts of the guests from the village. But Manorama was happy on one count – she reigned supreme in this small house of hers and her in-laws had been sidelined. For the first time in her life Manorama came to realise what it meant to be the mistress of one's own house. Her parents-in-law tried their best to take over and run the household, but Manorama did not allow them to interfere except to remain as guests.

Once the wailings and rituals were over, Manorama made it clear in no uncertain terms that she was not going to return to the village. Her parents-in-law raised the issue of the education of the children. Manorama told them she had decided to admit them to a school in the town, and they would remain with her. On their grandfather's, instigation, the children insisted on going back to the village. At one time Manorama feared that the grandparents would perhaps take away the children to the village by force. So, she took the children and left them at her brother's house for a few days. Her parents-in-law tried to reason with her, and failing that they even threatened her, but Manorama did not give in. Finally the parents-in-law returned to the village threatening to take back their grandchildren by hook or crook even if Manorama did not return.

Manorama concentrated on running the household after their departure. She had never stayed on her own earlier and was not used to running a household. Problems arose with regard to admitting the children in school. But most of her problems were solved by her brother who lived nearby. She even sent him to the village to fetch her belongings as also the school certificates of her children. Her parents-in-law refused to part with Manorama's ornaments, but her brother managed to get the rest of things. The children were admitted to a school and Manorama heaved a sigh of relief the day the children went to the school for the first time. She thought about Shibnath after a long time and realised what a burden raising the children was going to be. The children missed the village terribly and were not at all happy in the town. But Manorama was confident that they would soon forget everything and adapt themselves to their new life. Manorama was overjoyed to have the children completely to herself. But there was even more pleasure in the thought of having snatched them away from her parents-in-law and having caused them grief.

Manorama faced a lot of difficulties initially, but everything fell into place in a few days. She didn't even miss Shibnath any more. In a way, Shibnath had never been too close to her as they had spent very little time together as husband and wife. The children too were not close to Shibnath and hence were not much affected by his death. Initially, they used to miss the village and their grandparents as they felt stifled by the strange atmosphere of the new school. But soon they made friends and adapted well to the town life. In a few months, Manorama too felt, as the children did, that Shibnath, the village and the parents-in-law were like a bad dream and that finally life was dealing her a decent hand.

Manorama also felt at times that she had been freed suddenly from many bonds on leaving the village. It was as if Shibnath, in his death, had given her a new life, and she was finally able to lead the kind of life that she had always wanted. She cursed herself for harbouring such thoughts.

But then, how could she ignore the feeling of lightheadedness which came of its own accord to reassure her? She wanted to think otherwise, but there was no substitute for the pleasure derived from leading an independent life. She didn't have to stay in a village and bear the torments of her parents-in-law. The children belonged to her alone and no one else had any right over them any longer. This was her greatest gain. She was now going to raise the children the way she had always wanted.

Manorama also had the money for this as she was getting a pension. Apart from that, Shibnath had taken a large insurance policy in spite of his small salary. During negotiations with the insurance company, Shibnath's father arrived on the scene and argued that Shibnath had taken the policy for the benefit of his brother. Manorama sidelined him altogether and sent for her brother when she found her father-in-law raising the matter again. Both she and her brother informed him in no uncertain terms that only Manorama was entitled to get the money as per the provisions of law. Further discussion could be held only if Shibnath had left a will to the effect, and the matter was closed. Her father-in-law changed his tactics after that and mellowed down. He tried to befriend his grandchildren, and sought to take them to the village for a few days.

After Shibnath's death, her father-in-law tried many a times to broach the subject of taking the children to the village, but Manorama evaded the issue on some ground or the other. Every time her father-in-law visited them, he tried to draw the children towards himself. Manorama would reprimand her children for spending too much time with him. The children perfectly understood this tug of war between them and considered it an enjoyable pastime as long as their grandfather was around. For those few days when he was present, they abandoned their mother and drew close to their grandfather. They would even disobey their mother. Manorama had for long wanted to put an end to this farce, but had not been able to do it till now.

Manorama realised that her father-in-law was playing a new game when he raised the matter of taking the children to the village yet again. One day she took the children from school and dropped them at her brother's place. When her father-in-law asked her about them, she bluntly told him that she had left them at her brother's place as he was a corrupting influence on the children. Her father-in-law became livid on hearing this and threatened to leave for the village. He also warned her that he would see how she would keep his grandchildren with her. He told her he was going to take them away at any cost. Manorama asked him to leave and never bother to come again. Her father-in-law left after uttering a few more threats. Manorama remained scared for a long time fearing perhaps he would take the children away while she was not around. On her brother's advice, Manorama even filed a complaint regarding this at the police station.

After a few days, a pleader's notice reached her from her father-in-law seeking a share in Shibnath's insurance money and the right to keep the children with him in the village as per Shibnath's wishes. Manorama showed the notice to her brother and on the advice of their advocate, it was decided to ignore the notice and maintain silence.

After a few days, Manorama went to the village with her brother. She didn't go to meet her mother-in-law. Instead, she had a discussion with a few villagers about selling off the landed property belonging to Shibnath. Her father-in-law also reached the scene when he heard about it and publicly declared that he would not allow the sale of Shibnath's property. However, people were willing to buy the land and on assessing the situation, the old man decided to keep quite. He pleaded with Manorama to give some money out of the sale proceeds to the younger brother of Shibnath. Without replying to that, Manorama simply reminded him of her ornaments.

The land was sold and Manorama used the money to buy the rented house in which she lived. She was now leading a comfortable life. There was no need to pay rent for the

house any longer. She received a regular income every month from the investments that she had made wisely. Manorama not only took care of all the expenses but saved a bit too. After years, Manorama was able to spruce up the house as also her long-neglected appearance. She made friends with her neighbours and when her brother's lawyer-friend dropped in to discuss the financial matters, Manorama took extra pains to make herself a bit more presentable.

It was not that she was not thinking of Shibnath amid all these developments; it was only that there was neither any emotion nor any tenderness in those memories. Shibnath had not given her any love, affection or companionship while he was alive. But, in death, he had given her a house, financial stability and two children for the future. Manorama remembered him for only these reasons; nothing else. Now all Manorama's love, affection and time were dedicated to the two children. Her only aim in life now was to ensure that they came up well in life.

As life moved on in this easy manner, yet another pleader's notice arrived from her father-in-law. He had accused Manorama of being a woman of easy virtue and demanded the custody of the grandchildren. Manorama went out of her mind on reading that. She could never have imagined that someone would stoop so low for the sake of money, and that too someone who was a close relative. The allegations about her character seemed to have totally destroyed Manorama. The advocate explained to her that such white lies were always used in court cases. But Manorama was distraught. It was beyond her imagination that someone could make such base allegations when she had conducted herself with utmost propriety all these years. Manorama's advocate sent a strongly worded reply in response to the notice. On top of that, he also sent a notice to her father-in-law demanding a share in the paternal property for her children. No further problem arose from the father-in-law after that. But the piece of paper maligning her character turned Manorama into an altogether different person.

The pleader's notice had stated that Manorama was of a romantic bent of mind and had relationships with many men and that this was having a bad influence on Shibnath's children. Manorama tried to recollect what kind of behaviour on her part could have prompted someone to make such an allegation. She recalled the men who had come in contact with her, but there was no possibility of her having a relationship with any one of them as implied in the notice. Yet somehow she felt herself guilty. Perhaps she should have led an even sterner life. So she decided to make her life even more austere and live out to the full the role of a widow thrust on her by the society.

Manorama started wearing white saris and cut down her social contacts. She did not permit the advocate-friend of her brother to come to her house any longer and became extremely harsh and severe with the children. But, along with this, she also erased from her mind the fact that there had been someone called Shibnath in her life. Only she and her two children formed a part of the new life that now began for her. Apart from raising her two children into successful individuals, there was no other object or desire in her life. Manorama dedicated her entire time, life, efforts and aspirations towards this end.

But this had a strange and disastrous effect on the children. With the restrictions set by Manorama, the house turned into a prison for them. Manorama stood guard over them all the time and forced them to spend their entire time with her apart from the school hours and lead life as per her directions. But her discipline had totally divergent effects on the two children. Suman, the son, became the most obedient child of the mother and remained confined to the house. But, Sunita, who was two years younger, became self-assured and rebellious. Both the situations were painful to Manorama. However much she tried to encourage Suman to go outdoors, he latched on to her for dear life. On the other hand, the more she tried to keep her daughter under a leash, the more disobedient she became and distanced herself from her mother.

Manorama would feel the absence of a man in her life at times when she was all by herself, but that man was definitely not Shibnath. Life went on smoothly, but Manorama had to take the help of her brother every now and then. Besides, even though she was not yet forty, Manorama began to feel she would soon become an old woman and had to make necessary arrangements to take care of herself. Though she was hale and hearty, the possibility of tough times ahead began to plague her all the time. She forced Suman to opt for the science stream and study medicine when he passed school, though he was keen on arts. Even though Suman didn't voice his feelings, Manorama knew that deep inside he was angry with her for this. On the other hand, Sunita, who was not a good student, stubbornly opted for science simply to defy her mother who wanted her to study arts. Ultimately, she failed the examination.

Manorama's time passed thus futile psychological tussles in with her children. Her hair started graying and she began to put on weight. She even neglected her looks. She became even more businesslike in running the household and purchased an even bigger piece of land in the town with the money she managed to save. But Manorama's family was not a happy family. The three of them led three different lives with very little emotional bonding. The situation came to such a pass that Suman kept to himself while Sunita discontinued her studies and married a friend of hers at an early age. Mother and daughter continuously fought over the matter. One day Sunita left home and got married to the boy living in a nearby city. Manorama refused to have any kind of relation with her and also forbade Suman to keep any contact with his sister.

As soon as Suman completed his course in medicine, Manorama got him married as she did not want him to choose a bride for himself. She considered a large number of girls and rejected them. The girl she finally chose was rustic, half-educated and gentle as a lamb. Manorama believed that she could continue to exercise hold over her son if she chose a timid daughter-in-law who would look after her in old age.

At the ripe age of fifty-five, Manorama realised how wrong she had been in all her planning. What had happened to the beautiful life she imagined for her old age? Suman had joined government service and was now living in another city. Her daughter-in-law, whom she had assumed to be of the most gentle temperament, turned out to be extremely wily despite her surface sweetness. She had complete hold over Suman and made him dance to her tune in everything. Though both the son and daughter-in-law showed her due respect, she knew there was no sincerity in it. In the meantime her relationship with Sunita improved. Sunita's husband, whom she had considered totally worthless, was now engaged in business and doing extremely well for himself. He also respected Manorama despite her earlier rude behaviour towards him.

Manorama stayed all herself having reconciled to living alone for the rest of her life in that manner. She tried to fill the void in her life by rigidly charting out her day-to-day activities of how the house would be maintained, what she would eat, how she would look after her health, and how she would spend her time. She knew the children would come to her as per their convenience and needs, and not because they cared for her.

Manorama renewed her contact with Sunita when she became pregnant. Even though Manorama and Sunita didn't directly talk about it, it was decided through their acquaintances that Sunita would stay with her until childbirth. One morning Sunita arrived with her husband. Mother and daughter embraced each other and cried for a long time. Sunita took to her old life as if there had never been any breach in their relationship. Manorama found Sunita to have become a great deal more balanced and stable in the last few years. She had also developed a soft corner for her husband. Her only regret was that she had kept no relationship with them all these years for no good reason.

Sunita left after the birth of the child. A few months later, Suman's wife arrived in a pregnant state. This time, she behaved even more politely and respectfully, but Manorama

was aware that it was a pretence. She was needed by them then. In spite of knowing this, she took care of them and rejoiced at the sight of the newborn baby.

After having provided nursing service in this manner twice to her two children, Manorama concluded that enough was enough. She was no longer getting any younger. Let the children take care of their own children - she was now going to take some well-deserved rest. The son and daughter too didn't bother her any more. With advancing age, she learnt to accept her loneliness.

Her life would perhaps have progressed in this manner, had not a new development come up. The government was planning a huge business complex around the land that she had purchased. As a result, the value of the land increased beyond imagination. Manorama learnt of this when Sunita's husband came and suggested ways and means of using the land in various business ventures so as to make money out of it. Suman arrived a few days later and proposed to set up a nursing home on that land. Soon after, a reputed builder met her and proposed to buy the land at a fancy price. Manorama realised that she was now sitting on a huge fortune.

So she decided to draw up a will for her property and brought a specimen document from an advocate. One day she summoned Sunita and Suman to her to discuss the matter with them. It was clear from the beginning that Suman was not at all happy that Sunita should be involved in the matter in any manner. Suman had perhaps thought that he was the sole heir to his mother's property as he was the only son, and there was no question of giving a share in the property to a daughter. Also, Sunita had left home and gone away of her own accord. But the matter didn't come up for discussion when they met. Both of them assured Manorama that she was going to live for a long time yet and hence there was no need to discuss a will. What actually went on in their minds was of course a different matter.

Manorama had by now crossed fifty-five. It was not that she had become old, but many ailments had begun to bother

her at intervals. She didn't inform the children about her health problems. But she discovered that both Suman and Sunita had started taking extra care of her. They also tried to persuade her to go to their houses even when she was slightly ill. They would visit her with their entire family in tow and try to make their children come close to Manorama. She was used to staying alone and no longer enjoyed the company of so many people at one time. When the children stuck to her endlessly, she found it quite bothersome.

The future of her land often came up for discussion, but never in a direct manner. They would advise Manorama as to how to make the best use of the land to earn a good income from it. But Manorama was not willing to take any decision in the matter, and kept putting it off.

Once when she fell sick, Suman forcefully took her to his house. She was well looked after, but Manorama had a feeling that there was a lack of sincerity in everything. When she had got Suman admitted to the medical college long ago, Manorama had thought that her son would take care of her in her old age. But now she preferred to stay alone and look after herself. She did not want help from her son or daughter-in-law.

A few days after she retuned from Suman to her own house, Sunita came and took Manorama away to her house. Sunita and her husband pampered her and though Manorama searched for guile in their behaviour, she was disappointed that she would not find it. The reason was that both of them were genuinely affectionate. Even then Manorama didn't enjoy staying there and returned to her own house in no time.

In a few years the area around her land turned into a huge business-and-shopping complex and the builders of the city repeatedly tried to buy Manorama's land. They told her that she was sitting on a gold mine and was incurring losses daily by not selling it. Manorama maintained that she was managing comfortably with what she had and let the value of the land rise. When Suman arrived at last and proposed

to use the land for some profitable business, Manorama used the last weapon that she had saved for the occasion. She said, I too want to get out of these entanglements. You are quite well-off in your job. Sunita's business has been going through ups and downs. Apart from that, you are always busy in your job. Where do you have the time to look after any kind of construction work on the land? Sunita's husband can do that job properly. I will talk to him'. Suman murmured that that would be the best course of action, but Manorama knew that he was terribly disappointed.

The matter of the land came up for discussion when Sunita came to her. Sunita's husband said forthrightly that he had no interest in his mother-in-law's property. Sunita interjected by saying that he might not have any interest as he was not a blood relation, but she had a right over her mother's property. Why should she relinquish her right? Manorama told her that she was right. She too wanted that they should look after the property, but everyone was telling her not to will the property in favour of the daughter, notwithstanding the provisions of law. Sunita gave a twist to the discussion and said that she was not talking about the property. She just wanted to make the point that the son and the daughter were equal before the mother. Manorama avoided any further discussion on the will.

Days passed in this manner. Suman no longer raised the matter of the land on his own. Manorama asked him whether he was really interested in resigning from his government job and setting up a nursing home. Suman narrated his plans about taking a bank loan and building a huge nursing home which could turn out to be a money-spinner. But Manorama let the matter rest there.

At times she would write the names of both Sunita and Suman in the will but soon erase it and write only one of the names. Sometimes she would erase that one name too. When Suman or Sunita dropped in, she would ask them to get the will retyped. The son and the daughter were aware that the will had become a sort of plaything for their mother.

But what was not a plaything was the beautiful reality – the fabulous wealth of Manorama. Hence, they fully cooperated with their mother in playing the game without giving up.

Manorama's own children and their children had grown in years. The value of her land had skyrocketed. Manorama would look in the mirror and size up her old age and the loss of health. She moved her eyes over the draft will. 'As of today, while I am in full control of my senses, etc., etc. ... I, Shrimati Manorama hereby declare that...' The names of the beneficiaries had been written many times in the blank space reserved for the names and then erased. Manorama knew very well that she would never be able to write anyone's name in that space before her death. Or perhaps she would choose not to write any name.

# All Alone

WHEN SHE closed the door after seeing her husband and children off, Ranjana's mind filled with a strange emotion. She was all alone in the big house; the house which bustled with the presence of husband, children and servants was now completely empty and silent. She could not remember having ever been as lonely as she felt now. From her childhood, she had grown up in a large family amid brothers, sisters, uncles and aunts. She had never stayed away from her husband's family or from her own family after marriage. If Ashutosh ever went on a trip on rare occasions, the children were always there with her. As the children grew up, there was always a crowd at home from morning till late night. Even today, the house was extremely noisy with the children and the dog till everyone left in the evening. When Ashutosh decided to go to his village after receiving news of his father's illness, the children too insisted on accompanying him as they had their summer vacation. Ranjana could not go with them as she had been assigned some work in her college. The servant boy had left for his home a couple of days earlier. She was all by herself in these circumstances.

Ranjana entered the bedroom after closing all the other rooms. She had finished supper early in the evening. There was no other chore to do. As she sat on the bed and looked around, a sort of fear took hold of her. She felt a bit excited too. She lay down on the bed and closed her eyes. There was no hope of getting any sleep at this time. What could she do now? She tried to recall if she had any personal work which

could be taken care of at such a lonely moment. No, these days she didn't have any work which could be called absolutely personal. All the family's happiness, sorrows, wants, feelings, excitement, passions belonged to all of them together. She had no separate identity of her own apart from her husband, children and household. She was either a wife or mother or mistress of the house. Her college job was an extremely insignificant part of her life.

No one had imposed this kind of life on her; she had herself chosen it. Ranjana was never a dreamer even as a child. After the completion of her studies, she married the groom chosen for her by her parents. Ashutosh after acquiring his degree joined the government service as a doctor. Ranjana assumed the responsibilities of running the household with the meagre salary of his initial service days. All her time was spent in this effort. The two children were born while Ashutosh was being transferred from one rural health centre to another. Finally he was posted to a small town. Here his finances improved considerably as his earnings increased with private practice. As he was getting set in his practice, he received his transfer orders yet again. This time Ashutosh resigned from the government service and opened his own clinic. Ranjana had no opinion in this regard as she had no aim in life other than looking after the children and the household.

When a private college opened in the town for girls, Ashutosh persuaded her to join as a lecturer. Ranjana demurred in the beginning, for she had long forgotten all she had studied in her college days. How could she teach those girls? Ashutosh bought books for her. Then she wondered as to who would take care of the children when she spent the entire day at the college. Ashutosh found another servant. The founder of the college, who was taking treatment from Ashutosh, visited them one day and reasoned with Ranjana and made her agree. Ranjana took to bed at the thought of taking classes. Ashutosh gave her medicines and tonics, and finally Ranjana agreed to join the college.

A few days before taking up her job, Ranjana discovered that she didn't have even a single decent sari to wear to college. In the last few years, she had become totally disinterested in her appearance and clothes. She had lost interest in sex after the first child was born and she looked upon her relationship with Ashutosh only as an unavoidable duty. She didn't even take care of her personal hygiene, let alone taking care of her looks. If she failed to take a bath some day while attending to the chores of the children, she didn't bother about it. Taking a bath and tending to her hair was not important for her. She looked after the cow and the dog herself and accepted untidiness as a way of life. No wonder, her house was always in a state of disarray and chaos.

Ranjana had to tidy herself up besides purchasing new saris and blouses in order to go to college. At that time, it seemed to be an absolutely needless burden. She was used to existing in a totally dishevelled state, even when relations or guests dropped in and even Ashutosh, at times, seemed unhappy about it, but Ranjana did not bother. She had chosen an unexciting, staid and easy life for herself, not bothering a bit as to what others thought. Leaving the house and teaching in a college was like stepping into another world for her. It was not just that she had to obey a different set of rules regarding clothes; she also had to mingle with others outside of her home. Initially, she faced great difficulty in getting along in the new environment with unknown people. But she overcame this problem too. She maintained the bare minimum relationship with everyone in the college and had no other affinity with the college except the task of taking her classes. Gradually, she stopped making herself presentable when going to the college. She didn't mind going there all dishevelled. She was not bothered as to what others might think. For her college was only a slight aberration in her normal life and she chose to forget it once she returned home.

In spite of her lack of interest and cold behaviour, her colleagues didn't allow Ranjana to lead a withdrawn life. Whenever they found time between classes, they would extend

the hand of friendship towards her and try to be close to her. To avail the services of her doctor-husband, they would sometimes drop in at her residence. They tried to get close to her by confiding their secrets in her even though Ranjana never talked about herself. Ranjana listened to them without curiosity, and never probed as she had no interest in whatever they talked about. The only other thing apart from family, clothes and housekeeping that formed the centre of their conversation related to love affairs and sex. They knew all the scandals of the town and were quite adept at describing them in colourful details. Their male colleagues were the chief topic of discussion. In that girls' college, all the lecturers were women except for the principal who had been appointed after his retirement from government service and so were two others. One of them was elderly and doltish. Hence, the main target of their salacious gossip was the good-looking and young Srimant. Ranjana had barely noticed Srimant, but he seemed to her to be a gentle and decent person. She refused to believe all the filthy stories about him that were making the rounds, but would not refute her friends and only listened to them quietly.

Lying on bed, Ranjana thought about these colleagues. What would they have done now if one of them had been alone like her? What would Pravina have done? She had once told her that she had been in love with some boy before marriage and that she had saved all his letters. Would she have opened those letters and read them again if left alone in the house? What would Niharika have done? She claimed that Srimant was mad about her though she was not interested in him in the least. Of course, everyone had dismissed her claims calling her a day-dreamer. Would Niharika have made a tryst with Srimant in the circumstances? Jyoti, Sushama and Anuradha had never told any romantic stories about themselves. Would they have spent the entire night recalling their unexciting and dreary past?

While thinking in this vein, Ranjana wondered how she herself would pass the lonely night. There was nothing in

the house which she could call exclusively her own that she would look for it and be with it. She had no close friend whom she could call and in whom she could confide her secrets. There were no secrets in the life of a person like Ranjana. But she did have one solitary experience to cherish. And she was going to think about it that night. She had tried to recall the ten-year old incident many times in the past but failed. The reason was that whenever she thought about it, she was beset by so many problems that she had come to believe that the incident had never taken place and that she had only imagined the whole thing. She decided to surrender herself to reminiscing about those few days in her past when she was all by herself in her desolate house on that lonely night.

Ranjana sat up on the bed. No, she was not going to recall the incident in the usual, commonplace manner; she would prepare herself properly for that. She chose to beautify herself for the occasion to face the past. She removed the sari from her body languorously. There was no hurry for Ranjana now; she had an entire intriguing night before her. A strange sensation ran all over her when she touched herself after taking off all her clothes. She yawned and stretched and got up from the bed and with measured steps went and stood before the mirror. For the first time, she looked full-length at herself. It was a novel discovery for her. She looked from bottom to top as if in a trance. She had not known that she had so much of body in her. She caressed the full roundness of her flesh given to her by her years and got acquainted with it afresh. Looking at herself from different vantage points, Ranjana made an effort to familiarise herself with the discrete terrains of her body.

It was a new experience to be standing with her head held high before the mirror in bare feet and bare body. She came out of the bedroom and opened the doors of the other rooms. She switched on the lights and moved around the house as if trying to advertise her metamorphosed self to everyone. She was telling the darkness hiding inside the rooms

to look at her intimately, to touch her by extending its hand and make her familiar with it. She went and sat on a chair in the next room. She leaned against the wall on the verandah and went over to the kitchen to take a sip of water. She entered the bathroom and closed its door out of sheer habit. Then she flung open the bathroom door and surrendered herself to the shower.

In a short time, she came to terms with her life in the college and struck an easy balance between the life at home and the life outside. Everything was routine for her in college life. The same subject and the same old syllabi. Only the faces in the classes changed from year to year. Otherwise, it was simply the grind of one class after another. Ranjana had thought that she would manage the additional responsibility of the college in this manner along with housekeeping for a few more years till retirement. But after a few years, there was an extra requirement on her to do a Ph.D. Ranjana thought she would rather forego promotion than study and do research at her age. But Ashutosh again insisted on her going through it. He not only found a guide for her but also collected material for her from different sources. Ranjana too got immersed in the research work after delving into an unexplored period of the history of Orissa. Gradually, she developed self-confidence as her research progressed. She started writing her thesis and finally submitted it to the university within the stipulated period.

Ranjana had no idea how long she sat under the shower. She felt a chill. She turned off the shower and wiped herself dry and returned to the bedroom to sit before the mirror. There were plenty of cosmetics in the dressing table drawer which she never used. She applied some on herself now with a lot of care. She applied kaajal in the eyes and tied her hair carefully. She stood before the mirror and was pleased to see herself.

Two examiners praised her thesis. However, the foreign examiner from London wrote that even though the thesis was of a high standard, it should have made use of a lot

of information concerning the work available in the India Office Library in London. The research work would be considered to be incomplete if these were not incorporated in the thesis. He also volunteered to help the researcher in all possible ways if she chose to visit London for the purpose. Ranjana was somewhat disappointed on getting this news. But she also wanted to know what she had missed out. However, she would never think of going to London to pursue her research. She concluded that she would forget about her Ph.D. and her promotion.

But Ashutosh was not the one to give up. He persuaded Ranjana to write to the professor in London. The long reply that she received from the professor was highly encouraging. The university agreed to bear her travel expenses. Cheap accommodation was found for her in London. In spite of Ranjana's initial fear and hesitation, everything fell into place slowly and arrangements began for her visit. When the visa and the ticket finally arrived, Ranjana fell sick with fever. She thought it was a good enough excuse to cancel her trip. Ashutosh treated her and postponed the date of journey, informing all concerned about the delay. Ashutosh made a list of the things she would need in London and had them packed.

Ranjana wondered what she would wear and opened her cupboard. A pair of blue jeans caught her eyes below the rows of saris. She had not worn these since a long time and had forgotten that she had them. When she sat down on the bed and tried to wear it, she found them to be too tight. She had put on weight. Still she somehow managed to pull the zipper up and do up the waist button. To feel comfortable in that tight dress, she sat down on the bed and got up from it several times before moving around the room. Then she went to the cupboard again and looked for something to wear over the jeans. Her hand caught a thick sweater and she put it on. She picked up the socks which had fallen on the floor and wore them. And then she stood before the mirror.

Ranjana had felt like crying when she got down at Heathrow airport and stood in the long queue before the immigration counter to wait for her turn. She had never been away from home, let alone visit a foreign country on her own. It was not just that no one was known to her at that place, but everyone around her seemed distant and cold. She was somewhat reassured when she looked at her wristwatch to figure out the time and found a white man standing next to her take it from her and set it to the correct time. She stood in the queue for a long time and finally left the airport at two in the afternoon to face the chill and the wet weather. That dampened her mood even further. There was no need for her to have taken so much of trouble to reach London. When her taxi entered the city, there was a bit of thrill in her as she looked around. She must do her job well having come from such a long distance. She had to stay for three weeks in this strange city. The taxi reached the correct address in an hour's time and the taxi driver rang the doorbell. Ranjana was happy to see an Indian lady when the door opened. But she was again saddened by the fact that she had to pay a hefty sum towards the taxi fare.

Mrs Patel carried Ranjana's suitcase upstairs and showed her room to her. Out of the three rooms, the middle one was hers. The Patel family had migrated from Kenya. After the death of her husband, the lady had let out five rooms in the house to paying guests. Mostly, students, professors and researchers stayed there. She explained the rules and regulations of her house to Ranjana: she would serve dinner at six in the evening; guests had to prepare their own breakfast by taking things from the fridge; lunch had to be taken outside. She would call the inmates if there were any telephone calls for them, but she would not allow anyone to make a call from her telephone. One had to go to a pay phone for that and so on. Mrs Patel collected a week's rent in advance from her. She showed her the contents of the fridge and also how to handle the oven in the kitchen. Ranjana didn't feel uncomfortable as there was no one else

at home in the afternoon. But she felt a bit uneasy when Mrs Patel told her that there was only one bathroom for the three rooms upstairs and there were two gentlemen staying at the time in the other two rooms. However, she was so tired after the long journey that she dropped off to sleep in the same sari that she had worn earlier. Mrs Patel left her alone in her room.

Ranjana looked at herself in the mirror with the tight-fitting jeans and the sweater on. She liked what she saw. She had not been wearing anything except saris. Ashutosh had bought the jeans before she left for London; she had bought the sweater herself. Her body, which was ordinarily covered fully in a sari, looked different now. She seemed to look younger and a great deal more fresh and appealing than her usual self. She sat down before the mirror and applied nail polish on her nails. She selected a very bright shade of lipstick from a box which she never used and applied it to her lips. Then she stood up before the mirror with her hands on her waist. She bent left and right and swung her arms and body to look at herself. She winked at the mirror and held it with both hands before kissing her reflection.

Mrs Patel woke her up at 6 p.m. sharp and served dinner. Luckily, the other guests had not returned till then. The clouds had receded and there was sunshine. Apparently, the sun did not set before eight at this place. Ranjana found it strange that one had to take her dinner even when the sun shone brightly. She rushed through her dinner and went back to sleep. However, she woke up after some time and could not sleep any more. She remembered her home. How could she stay away from everyone for such a long time? The next morning she decided to telephone Ashutosh from some place. She felt like crying when she thought about it as she had no idea from where she could telephone Ashutosh. How was she going to contact the professor? Would the professor be able to understand her English? How was she going to commute to the library every day in the tube? She dropped off into an uneasy sleep. It was seven in the morning when

she woke up. She went to the bathroom and wore her newly stitched salwar kameez.

She came down, filled the kettle with water and proceeded to make tea on the oven. But she couldn't light it. She badly wanted to have a cup of tea, but the oven wouldn't light even on the second try. She came and sat by the dining table and was depressed to see a constant drizzle outside. She thought it would be wonderful just to sit inside the house and not go out. She was happy at this time to see an Indian lumbering inside the room. The young man greeted her and asked her if she would like to have a cup of tea. Ranjana nodded eagerly. He made tea and placed the cup before her. Then he sat down on a chair across her and introduced himself. He was Javed Akhtar and had come from Pakistan to do a three-month course. Ranjana told him her name. But her happiness at finding someone from her own country melted away soon. He was a Muslim and that too from Pakistan; the man must not be trustworthy at all. She drank her tea and took leave to return to her room. She thought she would seek Mrs Patel's help later for her own chores.

When she came down again an hour later, Mrs Patel was having her tea with a white man sitting near her. Mrs Patel introduced David, the fiancée of her daughter, who worked in another city which was David's hometown. He had come for some work to London and was staying with her. When Ranjana sought her help to telephone her home and contact the professor, Mrs Patel assured her that David ɔuld show her around when he went out on his work. David asked Ranjana to get ready immediately. Mrs Patel lent her an umbrella and Ranjana started out with David.

There was a telephone booth at the kerb outside the house. David took money from her, bought a card and dialled the number given by her. Ranjana seemed to have regained her self-confidence after talking to Ashutosh. Everyone was all right at home. When Ashutosh said that he was worried about her, Ranjana assured him that she had no problems

and that she would write everything in detail to him. David next talked to the professor over the phone at Ranjana's request and fixed an appointment for her an hour-and-a-half later. He also instructed her on how to reach the house of the professor. He told Ranjana that he would drop her at the underground station and explained how to reach the professor's house. But Ranjana insisted that David accompany her and he agreed.

David bought tickets for her for a week and showed her the map of the London underground. He explained the line she had to take and where to change trains in order to reach her destination. He also showed her the residence of the professor and the India Office Library on the London map. But when she had to take the escalator to go down, it became a problem for Ranjana. She could not get on to the moving stairs. Everyone moved easily on the escalator, but Ranjana could not do it. Finally, David, in exasperation, pulled her forcibly and made her stand on it. Ranjana took a deep breath on the moving escalator and discovered that David was still holding on to her. She freed herself, but when she had to get off the staircase, she again surrendered herself to David. This time David held her more tightly than necessary, but there was no other way for Ranjana except to surrender to this excess.

The professor was an extremely nice person and patiently gave a lot of advice on her work. He also suggested various reading materials to her. He telephoned someone in the library and requested him to help Ranjana in her work. David kept looking at his watch impatiently while they talked and when they emerged from the professor's house, he said that he had a lot of work and would leave after Ranjana reached the tube station. Ranjana made a lot of entreaties and finally persuaded him to drop her at Mrs Patel's. David finally relented, but said that they had to first eat somewhere.

They entered a nearby pub and David asked Ranjana what she would like to drink. When Ranjana declined to drink anything, he brought beer for himself in a big jug and sat

down to drink. After about half an hour, he suddenly remembered that they had come there to eat. He took money from Ranjana and brought some food for her. Ranjana didn't like it at all. As she was nibbling at her food in a dejected manner, she found that David was going on drinking without any bother. He didn't seem to be in a hurry to get up, though Ranjana kept looking at her watch. David got up after a long time and they started on their way back.

When she reached home, Ranjana found that Mrs Patel was not there. No one else seemed to be there at the time. Ranjana was scared to be alone in the house with David. She took leave of David and went upstairs. She entered her room and locked it from inside. Someone knocked on the door after a little while. Ranjana thought that she would not open the door. But she finally opened it as she was not too sure as to who was at the door. David was standing outside. He entered her room before she could speak. He said he had brought a book for her which contained a detailed map of the city. He sat by the table and explained the map again to Ranjana. She stood as far away from him as possible and tried to understand the routes. David closed the book in a while and tried to start a conversation with her by asking various things about India. Ranjana could sense that this man didn't mean well. She answered him in monosyllables and finally said that she wanted to rest as she was not feeling well. David got up to leave. But he embraced her yet again near the door under the pretext of taking leave of her.

Ranjana lay down on the bed and thought David's behaviour was atrocious. But she was surprised that she didn't feel as revolted as she had thought she might feel by the embrace of a stranger. Since a very long time, she had accepted that she had no womanly charm that could attract a man. Her self-confidence seemed to have been restored even though she didn't like David's advances. Be that as it may, Ranjana decided that she was not going to depend on David any longer. She got up from the bed and tried to figure out the way to the library the next day on her own.

That evening she again saw Javed at the dining table. She started a conversation with him on her own just to find out whether she could strike a friendship with someone in this friendless city. Javed was not only a decent man, but he also conducted himself in a dignified manner. He was a teacher of English literature at his university and was familiar with London from his earlier visits. When he took leave of her after dinner, he assured her that he would help her in all possible ways and that Ranjana could let him know if she needed anything.

The two of them started out together the next morning and walked to the underground. Javed drew a map for her on a piece of paper giving her detailed instructions to reach the library. Ranjana was totally disturbed to receive so many directions at a time but she took the paper from his hand and stood waiting for the train. Javed told her that his own train would leave from that platform but Ranjana had to go to the other side in order to catch her train. When Javed found her staring at him stupidly, he looked at his watch and said that he would accompany her for the day.

Ranjana recalled that lights were on in all the rooms. She got up from the dressing table and went into the adjacent room. She saw the mirror on the wall before switching off the light and stood for a while before it. She switched the light off and went into the next room. Suddenly, she saw an open window in that room. Was the window open when she had entered the room the last time? Of course, the garden was on the other side of the window and there was no possibility of anyone looking at her through the window. Even then she blushed profusely. Then she wondered about the impression she would make if someone discovered her in that attire. She switched the light off and went into another room. She opened the closed window and looked outside. She could see the street through the window but it seemed to be deserted. She switched the lights off in all the rooms and went to the barn near the courtyard. She took the sweater off and held it in her hand

as it was hot outside. She switched the light on and found the cow staring at her. Ranjana stood before her and said, 'Baula, as least you can take a good look at me.'

After spending a week in London, everything seemed to fall into place. She had now taken to wearing jeans. She could go to different places on her own. She was able to follow the English accent and converse with everyone. By now she had become a part of the Patel family. She had not met David after that first day; he had perhaps left London soon after. She became friendly with an African gentleman who stayed in the room next to hers. He was a jolly man and would always compliment Ranjana on her beauty; he would say in jest that he would definitely have proposed to an Indian woman like her had he not been a married man! Her work in the library was progressing well and she had visited many tourist spots with Javed on Sunday. She had accepted the ways of that land and was no longer revolted by the sight of young people in tight embrace and kissing or any other kind of physical expressions of their love.

She liked Javed and spent a lot of time with him. He was extremely sober and gentle in his behaviour towards her. Even then Ranjana had a feeling that he was totally cool and measured as far as she was concerned. Ranjana told him everything about herself, but he never came out with any information about himself unless asked specifically about it. Ranjana wanted him to joke or talk amorously with her as he did with everyone else. But while Javed talked lightly with others, he became extremely grave when talking to her. One day the bathroom door was not properly locked while Ranjana was having a bath and Javed pushed it open. He begged forgiveness and went out, and even though he was not at fault, he became even more reserved with Ranjana thereafter. More than her own embarrassment and discomfiture, Ranjana was distressed by the fact that Javed considered himself guilty, though the mistake was hers and she tried to put Javed at ease.

One day she shocked Javed by coming into his room. Javed was a bit taken aback to see her, but recovered soon and chatted with her. He had earlier told Ranjana that he was unmarried. Ranjana asked him if he was in love with some girl. After asking the question, Ranjana was amazed at her own audacity of being in a room with a person whom she scarcely knew and for asking such a personal question. Javed coloured a little and nodded affirmatively. He showed her the photograph of the girl. Ranjana held the photograph for a long time but didn't probe any further. Then she asked him about his studies, his university and his parents. After a while, Javed asked if he should go and get a cup of tea for her. Ranjana asked him in turn whether he drank liquor or not. When Javed nodded in affirmation she wanted to go to a pub with him and taste the stuff. She almost forced Javed to agree and they went to the neighbourhood pub that evening.

Ranjana insisted that she would drink whatever Javed drank. Javed advised her to drink wine but Ranjana brought a mug of beer and started drinking though the taste was bitter. When the mug was finished, Ranjana said that she was going to pay for the next round of drinks. She made Javed get more beer for both of them. Ranjana was feeling quite lightheaded when they finished their drink and left the place at a late hour. Everyone was asleep by the time they reached home. Mrs Patel used to keep food aside for those who didn't return by six. A microwave oven was kept to heat the food any time. Javed heated the dinner and both of them sat down to eat. Ranjana was still feeling a little dizzy. After dinner, Javed took her upstairs, supporting her and left her in front of her room. Ranjana hit the bed without changing; she was having a severe headache. Ashutosh had given her medicines for everything, but she didn't have the will to open the suitcase and look for them. She came outside and knocked gently on Javed's door. When he opened it, she asked him for some medicine for her headache. Javed gave her the medicine through the half-open door. Ranjana returned

to her bed with the medicine but she didn't seem to have the will to take it. She passed out on the bed.

Ranjana's work in the library was finished in a few days and it was time for her to return. She had already taken leave of the professor and made rounds of the other tourist spots along with Javed. Her return ticket was confirmed and she had informed Ashutosh over telephone about it. She had also settled her account with Mrs Patel. She had done her shopping and had packed everything neatly in a new suitcase.

Ranjana and Javed sat all by themselves at the dining table the last evening before she was scheduled to leave London. They finished their dinner. Javed asked her about her ticket and luggage. But Ranjana was quiet. Javed made coffee for both of them. Ranjana drank it silently. When silence reigned for some time, Javed advised her to retire early as she had to take the morning flight. Ranjana said that she had to get up at three in the morning as she needed time to get ready. She wondered how she could get up at that ungodly hour. Javed said that he had an alarm clock which he would lend her. They cleaned the dining table and as they were going upstairs, Ranjana said that the alarm clock was not going to help. She requested Javed to wake her up if he did not mind. Javed agreed. At the landing, Ranjana said as she moved towards her room that she would keep the door open in the night.

Ranjana undressed and lay down on the bed. To cool her burning body and mind, she surrendered herself to her own hands. She was not thinking of the next morning. She was now beyond past, present and future; she was beyond the confines of her world and was floating in the void. She could only hear the rise and fall of her own heavy breathing; she could perceive only her own touch, smell and taste. All her senses were now centered on a pulsating point of her body. Lost to herself, Ranjana tried to recall Javed's face, but his face did not materialise. So she devoted all her senses to invoking Srimant.

# The Image

WHEN UDAY PRAKASH was discharged from the hospital, the doctor handed over a prescription and a diet chart and said, 'Remember, this was the first visiting card of Yama for you. No, I am not trying to scare you nor should you be unnecessarily perturbed. There will be no further problem if you are careful; watch your diet and walk half a mile every day. You can live life the way you have always lived.' The doctor shook hands with him and wished him the best of luck as he saw him off.

Returning home after a month, the first thing Uday Prakash did was to lie down on his bed. There seemed to be a special charm in that. He was savouring the pleasure of returning home more than that of getting cured. He seemed to have got back his self-confidence. He went inside the bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror. He had to admit that he was not the same as before. There had been a lot of change in the appearance in the last one month. He knew that he had shed a lot of weight, but had no idea that it would leave such visible marks on his face. His eyes had turned into sockets, his cheekbones showed and he seemed to have aged all of a sudden. He reassured himself that everything would be as before if he followed the doctor's advice.

Would it really? Uday Prakash asked himself. He had never before thought about death in this light. Of course, he had written poems on death, but there was a great difference between death in a poem and death in the doctor's prognosis. Death in poetry came wafting–soft, cool, intimate, philosophical and spiritual, keeping time with snatches of melancholy; but

the other kind of death barged into the impersonal, antiseptic and relentless hospital room with summons in hand. A burst of chilly wind hit him. He emerged from the bathroom and lay down on the bed.

No, he had to change his lifestyle from now on. No longer could he deceive time and keep himself engaged in unnecessary work. Earlier, he would sometime suddenly remember that the electricity bill had not been paid as he sat down to write a poem, or that he had to send a reply to the letter from the municipality immediately. He used to push his writing notebook away and sit down with the cheque book in hand or the file of municipality papers. It was a tough job to write poems when many trivial domestic chores competed for attention. He would tell himself that the poem could be written the next day, but electricity would be disconnected if the bill was not paid that very day. He thus found excuses to avoid writing. If he didn't have a bill to pay, he would remember that he had to visit his sick friend even though his friend hadn't bothered to visit him when he was in hospital. Uday Prakash would reason with himself that he was surely more considerate than his friend and that poetry could never be more important than friendship. But he knew that he would have done nothing but sit at home if there was no pressure on him to write poems. Surely he would never have gone to visit his friend.

One of his friends was engaged in research for a long time, but he never got to write his book. When asked about it, he would say, 'I've no idea when I am going to die; why should I write the book now?' Uday Prakash was not able to fathom the significance of these words, but he knew that an absolute truth was hidden somewhere in these words. He didn't have such a handy excuse with him now. The doctor had informed him of his death even if he hadn't mentioned the exact date. The time between getting one's visiting card and the visitor arriving in person was not infinite. Those moments could be easily counted. He was constantly reminded of the fact that his father too had died of a heart attack at a fairly young age.

Until some kind of physical or mental calamity befalls one, it is assumed that life is a never-ending journey in which one can take decisions even if there is the apprehension of things going awry, for there was always the possibility of rectifying one's wrong decisions. But a man's attitude towards life changes all of a sudden the moment a tragedy comes his way. Time becomes finite and the endnote comes within one's vision. Uday Prakash was no longer thinking of some new venture; he was now worrying as to how he was going to complete his unfinished work.

Uday Prakash led an organised lifestyle and he was systematic in everything. But when he looked back on his seventy-two years now, he felt that success had eluded him in everything. Why did he think that way? When he started his life as an insurance man a long time back, he had made up his mind that he was going to be a poet. In the initial years, no one was willing to accept him as a poet. It was not as though he was a bad poet; the fault lay in his profession. By some unwritten rule, bureaucrats and professors had cornered the prerogative of writing poetry and didn't want the entry of base people like insurance agents into their charmed circle. But his perseverance triumphed in the end and in time Uday Prakash was acknowledged as a poet of eminence.

He gave up his profession and turned into a full-time poet once things settled on the family front. The children had grown and were away and his relationship with his wife had turned formal since long. His finances were under control. He didn't have any other burden on him and could afford to regard himself as nothing else but a poet, and this was the biggest problem in his life.

A novelist might lay down a rule for himself that he will write fifty pages daily come what may. A playwright may spend time with the actors and actresses and the director while writing a scene for a play. But it was not possible for a poet to engage himself throughout the day in writing poetry. There was no scope in his city to indulge in activities that

were essential to writing poetry such as reading books or holding discussions on poetry. When he spent time with his literary friends, he got a lot of titillating news about the personal life, character and scandals of different authors, but these were of no literary significance. Gradually he distanced himself from such friends, and led a dry and unsocial life. By and by he came from to be regarded a cynical recluse.

Even though he had disowned the literary circle, they were not willing to disown him. He was invited to meetings at intervals and off and on someone would turn up to interview him. The interviews were all alike - young journalists who had not read anything he had written would ask the usual questions in chronological order: What is your date of birth? How many books have you written? Where was your first poem published? What honours have been conferred on you? So on and so forth. He would be asked about his love life if the journalist was brash enough: Who is the inspiration behind your love poems? Is she married or unmarried? Of course, he had to concede that no one had asked him the name, address or telephone number of his inspiration. Another question that often cropped up was, why did he write. Uday Prakash was not able to understand the relevance of this question as no one ever asked an actor, an artist or a dancer why they acted, painted or danced. He had also been asked about the relation of his profession to his writings which was absolutely meaningless according to Uday Prakash. Was it necessary to know whether the poet was in the agriculture department or the animal husbandry department while reading the poems of a bureaucrat-poet?

Initially, he used to get angry when asked such irrelevant questions at interviews. Then he learnt to evade such questions and answer them in a non-committal manner. When the journalists expressed unhappiness at this and alleged that he was not cooperating with them, he stopped giving interviews altogether.

He also had similar unpleasant experiences at literary meets. When invited to a meeting, he would spend a lot of time in

preparing his speech. But all his labour was wasted because of the strange ways such meetings were conducted. Having a consciousness for time, he would reach the venue at the appointed time to find no one present there. In his whole life he had never seen any meeting start at the scheduled time. So much time was wasted on preliminaries such as an opening song, welcome address and the introduction of the guests that no one had any interest left when it came to the main discussion. At times, no listener was left in the hall when the speaker was called upon to speak towards the end of the proceedings. Uday Prakash often cut his brief lecture short disconcerted by the lack of interest in the audience. After a time he kept himself away from such meetings being disenchanted by them time and again.

By this time he was already acknowledged as an established poet and he had made up his mind that he was going to create a separate identity for himself for the benefit of his readers and the general public. He wanted to be known as a poet; only a poet and nothing but a poet. But people have different expectations in this regard. They take the poet to be a reclusive, impulsive and romantic creature who is also an alcoholic and a lecher to boot; someone who can only be tolerated for his poems. Uday Prakash had to create an alternative image of himself, which was a tough task. No one believed that he didn't drink when he declined the offer of drinks at writers' parties. On the contrary, an impression was created that he was a hypocrite who drank everyday at home but wanted to portray himself as a saint outside. His clothes too didn't bear him out to be a poet. India is perhaps the only country where there are designated clothes for people of different professions. For example, a man wearing a Gandhi cap is supposed to be a political leader, a man sporting unruly hair is assumed to be a dancer and someone dressed slovenly with a jhola hanging from his shoulder is considered an intellectual. Even though there are no specified clothes for a poet, a beard is thought to be a useful adornment.

Unfortunately, Uday Prakash didn't even have a moustache. He was a conservative, one-woman man and had never allowed any scandal to touch him in the matter of women. He had decided that his literary identity should be established only through his poems and not through his personal character or the clothes he wore, no matter what wrong notions people harboured about him.

Another problem in building up an image was with regard to the classification of his poems. What did he want to convey in his poems? While some poets were described as poets of love or revolutionary poets or poets of death, no one had ever used any such adjective for him. He wrote poems on different topics and considered that to be his uniqueness. But the critices would not let go of him so easily; they wanted to classify him. A critic had once reviewed one of his poems and come up with a distorted interpretation that had never been intended by Uday Prakash. When the review was published, Uday Prakash wrote a long letter to the editor explaining the reason behind writing the poem and its meaning. He had not known that the critics were not only dreadful but were also invincible and immortal in literary fights. The critic wrote an even longer letter in response to his letter and concluded with the following wisdom: 'It is totally irrelevant to delve into the reason of writing a poem at the time of evaluating it; the poem is the only thing that matters to the critic. Once something is published, it is public property; the author has no monopoly over it.' Finally, the critic had taken a dig at him by adding that the poet 'might have given us a good poem, but he has absolutely no idea what he has written about.'

He stopped crossing swords with critics after this incident and decided to write a preface to each of his poems where he would clarify why he had written the poem and what he wanted to say through it. But he faced many problems when he started working along this line. Sometimes he could not recall why he had written the poem and at other times, as pointed out by the critic, he was not sure what he wanted

to convey in his poem. He kept doing it nevertheless, though he knew that it was not judicious or truthful.

As he gradually came to grips with the problems arising in the evening of his career, he fell sick and was admitted to the hospital. On leaving the hospital, he pondered over the doctor's ultimatum about the time left at his disposal. Uday Prakash realised that his priorities had changed. He thought that the course of action he had chalked out for his life, future and writings was not final after all, and needed a revision. He decided to surrender himself to a different lifestyle.

While he had shunned literary meetings earlier, he now not only accepted all invitations but went out of his way to get himself invited to such meets. He could now be seen at different places day after day at all kinds of meetings, book releases, prize distributions, annual day celebrations, etc. Gradually, he became an accomplished speaker and fell in love with his own voice. He also got his academician-friends to initiate research on his writings and include his poems in textbooks. Sparing no efforts, Uday Prakash even succeeded in getting a programme based on his poems screened on Doordarshan.

One of the consequences of these efforts was that his name and photograph began to appear regularly in the newspapers. Uday Prakash also started giving elaborate interviews. While earlier he upbraided young men who came to interview him, now he went out of his way to be nice to them and to make them comfortable. Before they sent their texts to the newspapers, he corrected those and advised them on how to brush up their dispatches. He also provided them with his photographs to suit the needs of the text. In due course, the interviews were not merely confined to literature, instead his opinions were also sought on other matters. It so happened that once a journalist wrote a piece on what he liked to eat and simultaneously published the recipe of a dish prepared by Uday Prakash along with a photograph showing him cooking in the kitchen. His photographs in the

newspapers now gave him as much pleasure as listening to his own voice.

Uday Prakash of course went on writing poems while doing all this. It almost became a challenge for him to write as much possible within a limited time and the poet who had hitherto written very carefully and judiciously turned into a prolific writer. Needless to say, it affected the quality of his writing. But since he was an established poet, his poems continued to adorn the pages of magazines even though no one read them any longer.

Besides writing profusely, he also continued to write prefaces to his old poems so that his writings would be evaluated properly in the future and no critic would be able to twist the meanings. His regret was that he had not as yet been given a suitable sobriquet considering the quality and nature of his poems. On reading his old poems, the thought crossed his mind that he could be called a realistic poet. Hence, as he wrote the prefaces to his poems, he took care to put them into a mould of realism giving clear indications to this effect in his interviews. He also wanted it to be known that his poems stood for materialism since he himself was an atheist with no interest in spiritual or religious thoughts and he indicated this in the prefaces to his poems.

He also had to take care of his health along with his literary pursuits, but he was incompetent and totally apathetic in that. He neglected to take a morning walk every day, had no control over his food habits and was irregular in taking his medicines. The doctor expressed his unhappiness with him each time they met and would reduce his life span a bit further each time. Finally, he lost patience with the doctor and came to the conclusion that he was not going to live much longer anyway. Once he admitted this, he let go of all control with regard to food, medicines and exercises. He devoted all his time and efforts in preparing for death.

First, he got ready all the papers relating to his properties and explained everything to his wife. His wife had no interest

in those faded pieces of paper, and his lecture on the importance and need of each paper was acknowledged with a mere nod of her head. Uday Prakash gathered the papers and placed them on a shelf in the cupboard, labelling them as important papers relating to immovable properties.

However, unlike the immovable properties, it was not easy to take stock of his poems and explain them to anyone. Uday Prakash concentrated on cleaning out the other shelves of the cupboard and arranging all his literary creations in a systematic manner. He stopped writing new poems, attended fewer meetings and used the time at his disposal to put together all his literary creations for posterity.

As he started preparing his curriculum vitae, he realised that the highest literary award of the land had eluded him although many other honours had been conferred on him so far. He became obsessed with the prize once the thought entered his mind. He thought that his claims to literary award had been overlooked because of some deep conspiracy somewhere, and from that moment onwards he devoted all his energy to securing that award before his death.

The process was not easy. The final decision was to be taken by an apex panel of judges after the names of various authors had been recommended at various stages. Uday Prakash tried his best to ensure that his name got recommended at each stage. One had to get in touch with many familiar and not-so-familiar writers and appease them for this purpose. Uday Prakash threw himself headlong into the job. He used every conceivable means to please the authors, such as giving exaggerated and laudatory reviews of books written by them, releasing their books and praising the writers, hunting out their dates of birth and wishing them on their birthdays, visiting the elderly authors at their homes and heaping praise on them, sending copies of complimentary articles published about him to all and sundry, penning gratuitous dedications in his latest books and distributing them, and so forth.

When the award eluded him that year too despite his best efforts, Uday Prakash remained depressed for many days.

It was not just that all his efforts had gone in vain, he was also aware that the image he had painstakingly created of himself over the years was besmirched. To a great extent, he himself had destroyed the reputation that he had before falling ill and had created another identity for himself on his return from the hospital. He knew that his fame had dipped considerably after he started running after the award. He cursed the panel of judges and decided not to get involved in any further such misadventures.

But Uday Prakash forgot everything when the award process started again the next year. With renewed zeal he again started running after everyone who mattered. After spending his entire time and effort in this manner for six months, he became almost certain that he would get the award that year. He even prepared a draft acceptance speech for the purpose.

After imagining that he had already got the award, he concentrated on keeping his memory alive after his death. His children were away and they never bothered about literature. His wife didn't have any liking or even interest in either him or his poetry. It was futile to depend on them. He recalled that some writer had got his bust-size statue sculpted before his death for fear that people would forget him in future. After a great deal of thought he decided to create an organisation which would take care of keeping his memory and literary creations alive after his death. He gave it a lot of thought and finally settled on a gentle, timid and pious young man called Subhashish for the job. With him as a dummy, he created a trust whose only object was to publish, advertise and publicise the literary creations of Uday Prakash besides celebrating his death anniversary.

Having organised his life in all respects in this manner and having made formal arrangements for his literary future, Uday Prakash heaved a sigh of relief. He was convinced that after having led a successful life, he had also made arrangements for people to learn about him and assess him properly after his death. He had only to wait now to grab

that highest award of the land. But it was not to be so in his lifetime. Before the award was announced, Uday Prakash passed away one afternoon sleeping on his bed.

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Uday Prakash was feeling lightheaded. He looked at his dead body lying on the bed below as he floated beneath the ceiling. He seemed to be totally unburdened. He could see, he could hear, he could move around freely and he was able to feel and judge for himself. But, when he looked at himself, he realised that he had no shape and was totally invisible. This was also an enjoyable experience.

The face of the dead body, he thought, looked peaceful. contemplative and very poetic. This pleased Uday Prakash immensely. Then he saw a fly moving over his face. He came down and tried to swat it away, but the fly flew right through him. He returned to the ceiling angrily and devoted his attention to the few people gathered around his dead body.

He had thought that everyone would wail loudly, but nothing of the sort was happening. The people who had thronged the house on hearing the news of his death felt no grief; there was only a disgruntled look on their faces at the thought of taking the responsibility of a dead body at such an odd hour. His wife had abandoned his body and gone inside the kitchen to make tea for the guests. On the whole, none of the rituals generally associated with the death of a famous man had started until then. The pile of flowers and the televisions camera that he had expected were missing. Uday Prakash waited anxiously for the room to fill up with people.

But Uday Prakash had never imagined the bleak scene that was unfolding before him. He had thought that telegrams with flowers would be sent to his children and his body would be kept on blocks of ice decorated with flowers until their arrival so that his admirers and disciples could pay their tributes. He had written detailed instructions with regard

to his funeral rites; he had wanted his body to be burnt in an electric crematorium without any rites as he was an atheist. But his wife believed in rituals and when someone mentioned Uday Prakash's wishes in this regard, she dismissed it forthwith. She said that it was immaterial whether he believed in God or not, but the fact remained that he was a Hindu after all. Hence ignoring his last wishes, all the rituals were to be observed. Having said that, his wife started playing a cassette of recitals from the Bhagavad Gita.

Uday Prakash felt reassured when Subhashish arrived with his cronies. A photographer and some newspaper reporters accompanied him. As they waited for the television crew, his wife let it be known that the body should be moved out of the house as quickly as possible. Uday Prakash yelled that it was against his wishes, but his words didn't reach anyone despite his best efforts. His wife hustled the neighbours to remove the body to the Hindu cremation ground and got it cremated with all the usual rites. Uday Prakash was extremely distressed at this and turned his attention from his wife to Subhashish.

He was happy that the news of his death was broadcast over radio and television. The next day there was news of his demise in the newspapers along with his photograph. Subhashish was busy throughout the day in arranging a condolence meeting. That evening as Uday Prakash watched the meeting he drew solace from the fact that many important people attended it and many others sent condolence messages. All the speakers paid tributes to him and even the writers who did not get along with him refrained from saying anything against him. Uday Prakash didn't exactly appreciate what the speakers said about his literary creations, but the arrangements were satisfactory on the whole. He agreed that he had selected the right person to keep his memory alive though it depressed him a little that Subhashish had not succeeded in getting a message from the chief minister.

The advocate arrived the next day to give Uday Prakash's will to his wife and to discuss it. Uday Prakash had thought

that his children would have arrived by then, but his wife revealed that she had told them not to come as they could not have reached before the cremation. His wife became so glum on hearing that some money had been paid to a trust that she asked the advocate to leave before the tea meant for him arrived. Uday Prakash saw this scene too from a corner of the room, but it did not surprise him since he knew the nature and character of his wife very well.

His wife was in a very angry mood the day Subhashish went to see her. Before he could say anything, his wife alleged that they had usurped a part of her property, taking advantage of the physical and mental indispositions and weakness of Uday Prakash. In spite of all Subhashish's explanations that they had nothing personal to gain in the process and that all the money was to be spent in keeping the dead person's memory alive, his wife was not convinced. Uday Prakash was pleased when Subhashish started praising him, but his wife shut him up saying there was no need for such cheap flattery. She said that if he were such a great poet as Subhashish claimed, then they could go ahead and worship him using their own money. She further said that she was going to hand over all of Uday Prakash's papers to him provided he did not step inside her house ever again. Having said this his wife pulled out all the literary wealth of Uday Prakash from the cupboard, where they had been neatly arranged by him, and flung it on the ground.

Uday Prakash decided that he was not going to keep any further relationship with his wife who was so hostile towards his literary works. But he could not resist the temptation of being present there when the television crew arrived three days later to interview his wife. His wife had decked herself up for the occasion, wearing her best clothes and had arranged snacks and tea for the guests. She sat on the most comfortable sofa in the drawing room, looking confidently towards the bright light falling on her face. She was talking to the interviewer about her husband. She said, looking at the camera, that her husband handed over each

of his poems to her after writing it and no poem was sent for publication without her approval. She said that she was the first reader and critic of his poems.

Uday Prakash was amazed to hear this, but the answers she gave to questions that followed were even more startling. She said that all his love poems were meant for her and that he had never looked at another woman in his life. She continued in this vein for a while and said that he had distanced himself from her for a few years on being ensnared by some enchantress but had returned on realising his folly. She assured the interviewer that he had never ever written any poem for that woman. His wife kept on nonchalantly spinning these imaginary and baseless stories with Uday Prakash suffering through it as he was unable to object to anything. When she was questioned about his religious beliefs, she said that though he posed as an atheist, he was, in fact, a deeply religious man, and he never started the day without first performing puja in the morning.

Uday Prakash was disgusted to listen to such a spate of blatant lies and left the place in search of Subhashish. Subhashish had drawn some money from the trust account that morning and the first thing he did was to buy some whisky, using some of that money. Five young writers including Subhashish were now seated around the whisky bottle. The papers brought from the house of Uday Prakash lay in a bundle in one corner. The atmosphere seemed to be extremely vulgar and undignified to Uday Prakash. He had never imagined that Subhashish drank. However, he felt a bit relieved when they raised a toast to him after pouring whisky in their glasses.

The young men were now slightly intoxicated and showered praises on Uady Prakash. But they seemed to have lost their zeal once the bottle was finished. One of them said, 'Subhashish perhaps thinks that it is his own hard-earned money. The sonofabitch who provided the money is already dead and gone. The money should at least be put to proper use.'

Subhashish replied 'My first responsibility is to publish the complete works of Uday Prakash; other things can wait.'

His friend added, 'We have to slog for that and meet daily to sort things out. But how can we hold these meetings without booze? You do one thing. Buy a dozen bottles at one go. Whisky would be around and the work can progress smoothly.

One of them took money from Subhashish and went on his scooter to buy more whisky and food from a nearby eatery. Then they talked about the publication of the book. Discussion veered round to the prefaces written by Uday Prakash for each of the poems. It was decided after a lot of argument that they would not use these as there was no such precedent. Uday Prakash felt sad on seeing the hard labour he had put into writing the prefaces being dismissed off so disdainfully.

Uday Prakash received another shock when they changed track after finishing off the second bottle and the conversation took a different turn. The quiet and timid Subhashish became the most aggressive with no control over his tongue.

He shouted in a loud voice, 'I didn't have any time for this rubbish but only agreed to do the job when the old fogey begged me to do it. There are many poets who are much better than him. But what could be done? I have to do the job since I have assumed the responsibility.'

Everyone started criticising his poems after that. The people who were praising his writings a few moments earlier got busy in finding faults in his poems and belittling him. Uday Prakash was shocked that Subhashish himself was now his severest critic. Dejected, he left the place.

The next morning he went to Subhashish's house and was happy to see that he was now his usual self and was getting ready to send his poems to press. Uday Prakash stood behind him and looked at the pages of the open book. It was an old poem and one of the lines was 'Lord, forgive them'. In the preface to the poem, he had written that the line had been written off the cuff, and it was not to be taken as his

belief in God. Subhashish's pencil had stopped on that line. Uday Prakash had assumed that Subhashish had a religious leaning but had no idea that he was an ardent devotee of Lord Jagannath. Subhashish crossed the line out with his pencil and in spite of all the message Uday Prakash tried to send him to the contrary wrote, 'Oh, merciful Lord of Neelachal! Take me under your benign feet.

Uday Prakash decided that he would no longer worry about the future of his poems and go away in search of a place for his soul in either heaven or hell leaving these evil men behind. But he could not resist the temptation of finding out the fate of that award. He tracked the proceedings and when he reached the meeting of the selection committee on the appointed day, he found a hot discussion in progress about two writers short listed. The matter under discussion was not regarding the merits of the two competing writers; it was being argued whether the award could be given posthumously. One member cited instances of many posthumous awards, but another member insisted that nothing was to be gained from giving an award to a dead man and, on the contrary, it would hurt those who were alive. The industrialist who had instituted the award was presiding over the meeting and was in a hurry to attend his next board meeting. Since the members could not come to a decision, he brought the discussion to a close and decided to allow sharing of the award between the two. Uday Prakash returned from that place with his pleasure halved at receiving half an award.

Before leaving the mortal world for the last time. Uday Prakash wanted to see his complete works in the shape of a set of books and to attend his first death anniversary to find how much he had been remembered by the people. The volumes he saw in the house of Subhashish while a booze session was in progress didn't measure up to his expectations in either size, paper, cover design, typeface or binding. When they opened the book and read it, Uday Prakash found that Subhashish had used the editor's pen liberally to play havoc with his writings. He had hoped that someone would perhaps

select his original poems from the old papers along with the prefaces and publish an unadulterated edition of his writings in future. Uday Prakash looked at the place near the wall where his papers had been piled and found that the place was empty. Subhashish was telling his cronies that he had sold off the papers as trash.

The only thing that was left for him to see was the anniversary meeting. Uday Prakash looked at the stage with total lack of interest. His wife, Subhashish and the artiste who had come to sing that evening were seated on the stage along with the minister of the culture department. The meeting hall was quite full, but it was apparent that most of the people had come to listen to the songs since the hall became almost empty after that session was over. Uday Prakash could not concentrate on the speeches that followed for he felt that they were talking about some other person. When they described his nature and character, Uday Prakash found no similarity with his own and the analysis of his writings was way off the mark. The two persons with whom he was most unhappy - his wife and Subhashish - were the main attractions of the meeting and seemed to enjoy the goings on. Uday Prakash looked dejectedly at the right side of the stage where his oil portrait was placed on a chair decorated with flowers. The painting had been got done cheap by some novice. Uday Prakash realised that the so-called portrait of his did not at all look like him either.

# The Cast

SHUFFLING ON the uncomfortable chair of the police staiton, Balabhadra looked at the officer in charge with total disdain and some pity. With the arrogance of being a renowned author he faced the young man not yet brutalised by police service. The officer was quite deferential, and was reading a file after asking him to take a seat.

He closed the file and said, 'I am sorry to have called you at this odd hour; but we had to bother you as we need your assistance in this case.'

Even though the officer was quite polite when he said this, Balabhadra replied in a rough voice with slight irritation, 'Go ahead and shoot.'

The officer opened the file and glanced through some papers. Then he asked, 'Do you know anything about the abduction of Janakaraj?'

News about the abduction in Rourkela about four months earlier had appeared regularly in newspapers for the past several days and Balabhadra had read them like everyone else with some interest. But he decided that it wouldn't be proper for a serious writer like him to admit to his interest in such cheap and sensational news. Hence, he gave a straight no by way of an answer.

The officer said, 'It was all over the newspapers; perhaps you read it.'

Balabhadra answered, 'I have no time for reading such lurid news in the papers.' Though he had no idea as to why he was being questioned about the abduction, he made out that since he didn't know anything about the matter

his work in the police station was over and he would be allowed to leave.

The officer ignored Balabhadra's hints and concentrated on the file again. He looked up after a while and asked, 'Shall I send for some tea?'

When Balabhadra declined, he took out a paper from the file and passed it on to him. It was a newspapers clipping which contained a news with the caption 'Businessman Abducted in a Novel Way.'

As Balabhadra was about to say something, the officer spoke out, 'Read it first; I have to ask you questions about this.'

Balabhadra realised that there was some mystery in all this which he was unable to fathom. He now became a little more careful and read the news item again, though he had read it before. It vividly described how two men and a woman reached the office of a businessman one afternoon in a white Maruti van and vanished along with him in a crowded place. Balabhadra read it carefully, although there was nothing new in it for him, as he hoped that there might be some clue which he might have missed earlier. He tried hard, but could not figure out what he had to do with the news item.

The officer took the piece of paper from his hand like a magician waving his wand and kept it carefully in the file. He took out a book from the file and passed it on to Balabhadra. It was Balabhadra's latest story collection. Looking at the book, he suddenly understood why he had been summoned to the police station in connection with the abduction of Janarkraj.

The officer asked him, 'What does Kirtimukha mean?'

Balabhadra used a pseudonym for his literary works. In his own name, he wrote serious, high-brow and cerebral stories and novels which didn't get him any money. But he also wrote fast-selling stuff as detective stories, titillating novels, cheap political stories and sensational thrillers under the pseudonym Kirtimukha.

In a solemn tone to impress, he said, 'According to the canons of Oriya architecture, Kirtimukha is the sculpture of a human face at the centre of Vajramastaka.'

He had memorised the definition a long time back knowing he might need it some day; but if someone would have asked him about Vajramastaka, he would have had no ready answer to that.

But the officer ignored his fustian definition and asked, 'Do you also write under the name Kirtimukha?'

For a moment, Balabhadra thought he would answer in the negative, but the matter was not as simple as he had thought it to be. He seemed to have been entangled in some greater mystery than he was aware of and that called for caution. He, therefore, nodded in the affirmative.

The officer stared at him for a while and asked him after scanning the file, 'When exactly did you write these stories?'

Balabhadra understood where the question was leading. There was, in the collection, a story about an abduction; a businessman had been abducted in a mysterious way in the story and Balabhadra recalled that the story had a great deal of similarity with the Rourkela incident. He now realised that he was in a real jam. If he said that he had written the story before the Rourkela incident, it might be inferred that the abductors had been inspired by his story. If he said that he had written it after the incident took place, then one might conclude that he knew about the abductors. He was in deep trouble either way. He thumbed the pages and read some portions of the controversial story, in which two men and a beautiful woman had gone to the office of a businessman. He would not have believed that reality could be so close to imagination. Having just finished reading the newspaper report, that particular paragraph of his story gave him the shivers. He closed the book and gave it back to the officer, saying, 'No , I don't remember when I had written the story.'

The officer replaced the book in the file carefully. He stood up and shook hands with Balabhadra saying, 'I am sorry to have troubled you. When you go home, please try to recall

when you had written the story. Our enquiry is still on. We may have to contact you again.'

While returning home, Balabhadra tried to recall when he had written the story. Definitely not after the Rourkela incident. He had written it a long time back. He had been inspired to write the story after seeing an American movie on television. As he was flipping through channels on the television one evening, he had stumbled on the movie which was already halfway through. He didn't even know the name of the movie, but it was absorbing and he decided to write a thrilling story based on it. This movie was the inspiration for his story which he had written soon after. But he didn't want to tell all that to the police. It was not their business to know when he had written the story, and who or what had inspired him. Besides, as an author, he didn't want anyone to know that his story was a copy of some foreign movie.

He would not have imagined that a story written by him, based on a movie, could ever land him in trouble. He recalled the similarity between the characters in his story and the ones in real life. What could an author do if imaginary characters resembled some real-life characters? Why should the author be held responsible if the incidents narrated in a story actually got enacted somewhere?

Mita had one day come to his house all of a sudden and asked, 'Uncle, is it true that you have written a story about me?'

Balabhadra was amazed at the question. And a little bit perturbed too. Had he written something bad about some girl that made Mita accuse him in this manner? He asked, 'What story? Why should I write a story about you?'

Mita said, 'My mother always accuses me, that I constantly nag the servants; she was telling me that you have written a story based on that.'

Balabhadra recalled that he had written a story like that, but Mita was nowhere in his mind when he had written it. He located the story in an old collection of his and handing the book over to Mita said, 'I had written about a housewife

and her servants, but why should it be your story? You may read it yourself.'

He had thought that Mita would leave it at that, but she actually took the book from him and sitting down started reading the story. It gratified Balabhadra that at least someone was reading his old story with such interest.

But, after reading the story, Mita stood up angrily before him. She accused, 'Of course, the story is about me.'

Balabhadra took the book from her, ran his eyes over the story and said, 'This is true of all middle-class housewives. Is there any household where the mistress doesn't nag the servant constantly?'

Mita retorted, 'And what about the tribal servant boy you have written about?'

Balabhadra said, 'Half the people employ tribal boys as servant. Look at our neighbour. Does he not have a tribal servant?'

Mita was still not convinced. She asked, 'How many people have a servant called Bula?'

Balabhadra was about to reply that an author looks for an appropriate name while giving a name to a character; if the servant's name would not have been Bula, it could perhaps have been Nata. As he was about to say this, he suddenly recalled that Mita did have a servant called Nata. He didn't say that but looked at the year of publication of the book. He was relieved all of a sudden and said, 'Here is the proof. This story has no connection with you as you were not even married when the story was written, not to speak about being a housewife.'

Mita took the book from him and gave it a good look. She said, 'Are you psychic that you could foresee I would quarrel with the servants and I would have a tribal servant boy called Bula when I got married and set up home?'

Balabhadra showed her that the first edition of the book had been published before her marriage. Mita said that the wrong date may have been given. Or perhaps he had added that story in the second edition of the book. Perhaps she was

taking a cue from a new item published that day that some reader had filed a suit against an author for including the same story in two collections!

Balabhadra had not been able to give a satisfactory explanation to his niece try as he might. In that case, how was he going to explain to the police officer that the story had been written a long time back? The thought kept nagging him while sleeping that night. People think that whatever the author writes is based on some real-life character or event. They never know that he has an unending source which is his imagination.

Like Mita, many other people had similarly confronted him from time to time. There were good characters as well as bad characters in his stories. But no one had ever told him that the altruistic, exemplary character in his story had been created with him in mind and hence, he was grateful to the author. But half a dozen of his engineer-friends became his enemies the moment he wrote a story about a corrupt engineer as though he had written the story with them in mind. Even Vikash who was his friend from school days had misunderstood him. He read his story in some magazine and told him. 'I had not expected this of you.'

Balabhadra said, 'I am sorry; I should have told you I was writing the story of corruption in your department which you had told me.'

Vikash retorted angrily, 'How would that have helped? I have got maligned before everyone because of you.'

'Only those who are corrupt will be maligned. Didn't you tell me how rampant corruption is in your department?'

'That's all right. But everyone will think that I am that corrupt officer considering the way you have written the story. Does anyone have a name like Akash? Everyone would think that the man is Engineer Vikash.'

Balabhadra wanted to tell him that he knew at least three persons named Akash, but he desisted from doing that. He lied in order to pacify Vikash, 'I had thought of that corrupt, Superintendent Engineer Vinay you were talking about when I wrote that story.'

'In that case why didn't you call him Vijay instead of Akash? Apart from that, the barrage you mention falls directly under my jurisdiction.'

Vikash took leave of him that day sulking, and their forty-year old friendship eroded because of that single story.

He remained worried even though he had not received another call from the police station for some time. He wanted to know about the developments in the abduction case. But the old case had ceased to make news in the papers even though Janakraj was yet to be traced. He asked a couple of acquaintances about it, but no one seemed to know anything. Finally, out of desperation, Balabhadra rang the police officer himself.

When he got him on the phone, Balabhadra said, 'You had told me that when I recall when I had written that story ...'

The officer interrupted him and said, 'I was about to call you myself. You have to come to the police station once again if you do not mind.'

Balabhadra asked when he should come and the officer told him to come immediately. Balabhadra thought that he would say he was busy and could not come straightaway, but he changed his mind and went.

He was now seated on that same old chair and the officer was reading a page from the file sitting across him as before. Balabhadra was a bit rattled and didn't look at the situation as confidently as earlier. When the officer offered him tea, he thanked him and nodded in the affirmative.

The officer took out the book from the file and referred to the page on which the story had begun. He asked, 'When did you say you wrote the story?'

Balabhadra replied, 'I don't remember exactly, but I had written it some years back.'

Tea came and offering him a cup, the officer said, 'Have your tea and try to recall the exact time. The book has been published recently and hence anyone would think that the story was also written in the recent past.'

Balabhadra drank the tea without giving any answer straightaway pretending as if he was thinking hard. As he was about to say something, the officer said, 'Since you are a respected person in society, let me tell you what we suspect. There are some crucial descriptions in your story which are not known to anyone except the criminals and the police. These have not been made public yet as they might hinder our inquiry. The criminals in your story had used a white Maruti van and the same type of car was also used in the Rourkela incident. How could it be so?'

Balabhadra replied, 'That's quite simple. If you read the newspapers, you will find that white Maruti vans are used in most of the crimes!'

The officer said, 'You may be right there. Now come to another part of your story. A sealed envelope containing a plain sheet of paper had been discovered on Janakraj's table after the abduction. No one knows about this except the police and you. How did you know about it?'

Balabhadra had no ready answer to that. He said after a while, 'I didn't know that such an envelope had been found in the Rourkela case. It was all my imagination. Besides, I have already told you that the story had been written a long time before the Rourkela incident.'

The officer asked, 'In that case, would you say that the Rourkela abduction had been inspired by the story?'

Balabhadra was ready for the question. He said, 'The imaginary events of a story are sometimes repeated in real life later. There can be no other explanation for the same except sheer coincidence. A book describing the sinking of a luxury liner on its maiden voyage had been published years before the *Titanic* had sunk. In fact, the size of the ship, the number of passengers on board and many other minor details described in the book were strikingly similar to the *Titanic* disaster.'

The officer agreed, 'Yes, I had read about it somewhere. People say that the prophesies of Nostradamus still come true. But I was not talking about either that or the novel

predating the *Titanic*. I was talking about writings which instigate someone to commit a crime. There are many instances in our police records where a criminal commits a copycat crime inspired by a book or a movie.'

Balabhadra questioned, 'But how could the Bihari goondas have read my story?'

The officer became alert all on a sudden on hearing this. He sat up straight and asked, 'How did you know that Bihari goondas were involved in the Rourkela abduction?'

Balabhadra replied, 'I had read it in the newspaper you had given me that day.'

The officer took out the old newspaper clipping out of the file and handed it over to Balabhadra. He said, 'Please read it again. It does not say anything about the origin of the criminals.'

Balabhadra read the report carefully. In fact, there was no mention of Bihari goondas in that. How did such an idea come to him? Even though he had earlier said that he didn't know anything about the Rourkela incident, he now tried to correct himself and said the he might have read it in some other paper. The officer said, 'We have all the newspaper clippings; none has reported that the abductors came from Bihar. 'We will appreciate it you can show any such newspaper report to us.'

The officer stood up to indicate that the questioning was over. As Balabhadra was leaving, the officer added, 'Our inquiry is still going on. Our primary suspicion will be strengthened if it is known for sure that the abductors are actually from Bihar.'

For the first time, Balabhadra was gripped by a sense of fear. He had once had to go through a wringer as an author because of a story of his about a political leader. The character in his story was lame and was extremely malicious, immoral and corrupt. Even though he had not given any name to the character and had only referred to him as clubfoot, to his misfortune, there was a minister in the government at that time who was lame and who was known

to be extremely corrupt. When Balabhadra's story came out in a magazine, everyone assumed the politician to be the lame minister, and that became a source of great mirth among the people. Even though the minister did not read any literature, the news eventually reached him and one day his henchmen arrived at Balabhadra's house. They were not willing to listen, however much he tried to convince them that the character's deformity was only a coincidence and that no offence was meant. Balabhadra agreed to tender a public apology through newspapers and assured them that he would exclude the story when his next book was published. But they could not be persuaded and they threatened that they would break his leg and make him lame too. Luckily for Balabhadra, there were problems for the minister at this time and his henchmen left Balabhadra alone and went forth instead to break the legs of the minister's opponents, in his own party.

His friends asked him whether he had created the character with the lame minister in mind or was it just a coincidence that his imagined character resembled a real-life character. Balabhadra was unable to provide an honest answer to the question as he certainly knew of that political leader but he was not very sure whether he had been at the back of his mind while writing the story.

It was not as if he didn't keep someone specific in mind while writing. But he would write about them in an exaggerated manner by changing the names of the characters or mixing up their nature and attributes or by giving a twist to the events. Only in one story he had described the relationship between a husband and wife in a straightforward, candid and honest manner; it was possible because he had written the story after the death of Sarasi. Of course, it often struck him that the story was one-sided for his wife's point of view had been totally ignored. Given an opportunity, Sarasi would perhaps have given cogent rejoinders to some of the comments he had made about her.

Sarasi was a real-life character. Many of his imaginary characters must similarly be nursing grievances against him for the things he wrote about them. In one of his stories, no one had sympathised with a woman harassed by dowry demands considering the portrait he had sketched of her. The list included her former lover, her husband, her parents, her in-laws, the people living on her street and even the rickshawpuller who ferried her. Balabhadra had finally burnt the woman in fire. Had he done justice to that imaginary woman? What reply could he give if she confronted him and asked for an explanation?

Balabhadra tried to shake off all these unpleasant thoughts. The Rourkela abduction was his immediate problem. He had no proof that he had written the story before the incident took place and not after. He decided to enlist the support of his publisher. Unfortunately, he did not have a good relationship with him and he was not very sure if the publisher would like to get involved with the police. Even then he telephoned him when he reached home but was informed that he had left for Rourkela two days back.

As he reflected on it all, he thought that he could prove through the publisher that the manuscript had gone to the press a long time back even though the book had been published only recently. The police could surely get the truth from the publisher even if Balabhadra failed to enlist his support.

He telephoned the police officer and told him, 'I now recall that the manuscript of my book had gone to the press long before the Rourkela incident. It proves that the story had been written before the incident and not afterwards. You may get this confirmed from the publisher.'

The officer asked, 'Tell me the name of your publisher.'

When he gave Surasen's name, there was a long pause and then the officer said, 'Hmmm, that's interesting,' and disconnected the line.

For a few days after that there were no calls from the police station, but Balabhadra continued to worry. What kind

of characters could he create for his stories so that he would not land in trouble, he wondered. The reader expected the characters to be realistic, but that created problem. Once he had written a story about an extramarital affair of a married woman. The story was liked by the readers, but everyone tried to figure the real woman behind the story. The names of many socialites were mentioned in that context; women talked in whispers about it in clubs and some women pointed fingers at each other. Ultimately, Balabhadra was blamed for having dragged the names of daughters and daughters-in-law of good families onto the streets.

A friend of his rang him one day and said, 'We have a bet amongst us on who Radha really is. I say that it is Seema Sharma, but my friend says it is Sonali Das. Pray tell me who is Radha?' Balabhadra shouted at him and put down the phone. But he discovered a few days later that Mr Sharma had stopped talking to him.

The characters in the books he had written under the pseudonym Kirtimukha were free from such problems when considered from that angle. Perhaps he had created those cardboard characters to escape from the oppressive world of his realistic characters. They were all lifeless zombies whom he didn't want to hold in esteem as a man of literature. These movie villains, rouge policemen and two-bit lovers were the denizens of his grey, creative hell whom no one was likely to meet in the everyday world. They were so far removed from reality that no one had as yet compared himself to the characters created by Kirtimukha nor had anyone ever asked him about the source for such characters. But reality often followed imagination. The Rourkela abduction incident was one such which had created trouble for him. It was as if the neglected shallow characters wanted to take revenge on him.

There was another telephone call for him from the police station. Balabhadra was a little relieved to have received the call as he wanted to know the progress of the enquiry as also his own position in it.

He had a feeling of déjà vu in sitting before the officer, who was reading something from an open file. The officer lifted his eyes from the file and looked at him after ordering tea. Then he said, 'We will be troubling you from time to time until our enquiry is complete.

Extending his hand of friendship, Balabhadra said, 'I would be happy to help you in any way I can.'

The officer said, 'We now know that a gang from Bihar is behind the kidnapping. Can you recall where you had read about the Bihari goondas?'

Balabhadra didn't dare give any extended explanation for this; he only said, 'no.'

'How did you come to know about Bibhash Das?'

'Bibhash Das? I don't think I know anyone by that name.'

'One of the criminals in your story is called Bibhash Das. Shall I give you the book? Would you like to take a look at it?'

'No, I recall now. I have used the name in that story. We authors give imaginary names to our characters. Just as situations in a story are the result of imagination, so are the names of characters.'

The officer said, 'It is also true that stories are sometimes based on real-life situations. Would you have given the real-life name or an imaginary name if you had written a story based on a real-life incident?'

Balabhadra knew that he was getting into trouble no matter what his answer might be. He recalled the episodes of Akash and Vikash, and Vijay and Vinay. But there was no point in telling all that to the policeman. Instead of giving a straight answer, he said, 'Authors normally use imaginary names.'

The officer closed his enquiry for the day and said, 'Do let me know if you recall anything about Bibhash Das.'

Balabhadra could not understand why the police was so keen about Bibhash Das. He used many other names too in his story. He tried honestly to recall if he knew any Bibhash Das, but he didn't seem to know any. He kept worrying about Bibhash Das for some days after that.

Until then, he had not discussed his problems with the police or with anyone. He thought he would discuss the matter with Surasen and seek his advice. But when he enquired about him from his office over phone, he was told that they didn't know whether he had gone to Rourkela or somewhere else and that they had no idea when he would return.

The next day the mystery of Bibhas Das was solved. A brief news about the abduction appeared in the newspapers that morning. The police had arrested some members of a gang from Bihar on suspicion even though Janakraj had not been traced until then. One of the members of the gang was called Prabhash Das.

Balabhadra was suddenly frightened and imagined himself to be inside a jail. He had written about the life in jail in a story from his imagination as he had never been inside any jail. He recalled the jailor Gunanidhi and his sidekick Bhikari Nayak from that story. In his story, Gunanidhi was made out to be a rascal and a genius at inventing new ways of torturing prisoners.

Balabhadra feared having to contend with that kind of jailor were he to be incarcerated. Gunanidhi would then stand before him and say, 'You wrote all kinds of rubbish about me in your story, hadn't you? Just watch, how I am going to make life hell for you!' After that, he would set Bhikari on him to torture him. He recalled all the sadistic methods Bhikari had used in the story and the same being used on him. It was terrifying.

Balabhadra was now tormented by the brief newspaper report, the mysterious disappearance of Surasen, the arrest of Bibhash alias Prabhash Das, and not receiving any summons from the police station. He could not concentrate on anything else except this case. He would be relieved only when Janakraj was traced and the criminals arrested, whatever may be the reason for the similarity between the story and the real incident. Only that would prove that the real incident was in no way connected with his story and that it was a sheer coincidence. He kept staring at the telephone.

Just as his patience was running out, he received a call from the police station. He heaved a sigh of relief as there was an easing in the pent up tension. But he also knew that by having to make repeated visits to the police station he was getting even more involved in the world of crime. Sitting in the police station and looking at the officer, he thought of Kafka's world, which was as ludicrous as it was frightening. The officer's tone was totally businesslike as he now questioned him about Surasen instead of the kidnapping. Balabhadra told him that he had known Surasen since a long time and that they had a cordial relationship with each other which extended beyond business. He had been informed by Surasen's office that he had gone to Rourkela, but Balabhadra had no idea about the purpose of his visit. No, Surasen never interfered in his writings and he never discussed the subject matter with Surasen before writing a story. They had at times discussed the kind of stories that would go down well with the reading public, but Surasen was in no way associated with him in writing the story about the abduction. In his stories, he made use of trivia heard from friends, but he couldn't recall that he had written either this particular story or any other story based on any incident ever narrated by Surasen. He had no share or interest in Surasen's publishing business, and had no idea of its finances. He had no idea whether Surasen had actually gone to Rourkela nor did he know when he would return. Surasen had never stayed away from the city for such a long time as far as he could remember.

After extracting all the information from him, the officer said, 'You have to accompany us to Rourkela to help us in our enquiry.'

Balabhadra wasn't surprised at this as he was aware by now that he was an inseparable part of the police investigation for whatever reason, and he had to take an active part in it.

Seated near the constable in the moving train, Balabhadra looked around. The elderly gentleman and the young couple

sitting in front seemed familiar to him. He watched their activities forgetting his own problem. The gentleman gave the train timetable to the young man sitting near him and said, 'I am not able to locate my glasses; can you please tell me when the train will reach the junction?'

The young man turned the pages. The gentleman told him that the information could be found in either Table 10 or 11. The young man told him the arrival time at which the gentleman commented that the train was running three hours late. Balabhadra remembered the name of the young man suddenly. He was Madhuban and his wife was Surama. He had written a story about them a long time back.

The officer in charge of the Rourkela police station was elderly, uncouth and hot-tempered. The interrogation room in the police station was dimly lit, depressing and frightening. As Balabhadra sat down on the chair, the officer said, 'You would be happy to know that our enquiry is over. You surely know about the business relation between Surasen and Janakraj. You must also know that Surasen owed a great deal of money to Janakraj. We have arrested Surasen and he is in the lock-up. We suspect that you are an associate of Surasen and so we are going to arrest you.'

The officer stood up and pointing his finger at him in a dramatic flourish, said in a loud voice, 'You are under arrest.'

That did not surprise Balabhadra in the least as if he had expected it all the time. He looked around him. The lock-up was on the officer's left. Gunanidhi stood at the door of the lock-up room in full uniform, and pointing at Balabhadra, he was giving some instructions to Bhikari who was dressed as an orderly. He could see all the people standing inside the lock-up through the iron bars. Surasen glowered angrily at him; it was as if he was saying that he was in this predicament because of Balabhadra. Seema Sharma and Sonali Das stood beside Surasen and both were smiling mischievously. The woman standing next to them had a burnt face which looked terrible, and she was staring steadfastly at Balabhadra with her blind eyes. Mita was holding and

caressing her infant but she didn't look at Balabhadra. Vikash and Vinay were busy talking to each other and were laughing over something. Sarasi was busy cooly chewing paan and she spat out when their eyes met. The lame minister pointed at him with his crutch and his henchman twirled his moustache. On the bench, Surama seemed to be asleep with her head resting on Madhuban's shoulder.

Bibhash Das and other Kirtimukha characters stood behind them in solid rows and the lock-up seemed to overflow. Tired and sickened, Balabhadra turned his face away from them all.

# The Progenitor

UMASHANKAR COULD not recall anyone having given him so much importance as a writer. Of course, he had received the highest literary award of the land, but the glory had been short lived. At the felicitation held for him the industrialist dishing out the prize was the chief attraction rather than Umashankar. The prize money had been spent within a few days on his daughter's marriage. The momentary backslappings and ovations had soon been replaced by envy and intolerance and the razor-sharp comments and carping of critics.

The reason behind his new-found respectability was not literary although the award-winning novel was the cause of it. When he had written the book, television had not become all-pervasive and the age of serials had not started. With media explosion and twenty-four hour television channels, there was now a demand on literature to provide material for serials. The value of award-winning novels skyrocketed all of a sudden as it was relatively easy to sell this stuff to the television authorities.

One day, out of the blue, Umashankar received a telephone call from Mumbai about an offer to make a film on his book. The call was from a famous producer who was known more for his sex life than for his films. Of course, it was not the first time that Umashankar had received a proposal for filming one of his stories. Local filmmakers often took his signature on permission letters and a few enthusiastic producers and directors had discussed with him at length the details of putting his novels on celluloid. But Umashankar had never received a dime from them all these years in spite of all the

signatures and extended discussion. As a matter of fact, none of his stories had ever had the good fortune of making it to the silver screen. Umashankar had therefore decided that he would no longer involve himself with this business and waste his time. But the phone call he received from Mumbai was from a renowned filmmaker of national repute and the conversation was highly encouraging. The filmmaker said that he had read his award-winning novel end to end twice over and he was determined to make it into a film since he had been totally mesmerised by the story. He wanted to discuss with him at length and offered to send air tickets to Mumbai and make arrangements for his stay in a five-star hotel. Umashankar would have readily agreed were it not for his earlier unpleasant experiences with filmmakers. But he did not want to miss what seemed to be a golden opportunity either and said that he would think it over and get back to him. The producer said that he would telephone him again the next day at the same time.

Umashankar received a second telephone call from Mumbai the next day from another equally famous filmmaker who, if the tabloids were to be believed, was involved in even more scandalous affairs. This filmmaker said that he had read Umashankar's novel three times and instead of summoning him to Mumbai, he said, 'I had bought tickets to come to you the day I finished the book. I am reaching your city on Monday. Please set aside some time for me that day.'

Umashankar had no choice but to agree and in any case he was pleased that there were demands on him.

The producer telephoned him on Monday immediately after checking into the hotel. It was fixed that they would meet the same evening. A car came to pick him up at the appointed time and after entering the hotel suite Umashankar felt reassured when he found that the producer matched his imagination. An extremely refined person clad in white clothes and white shoes welcomed him in an informal manner and offered him the best seat in the room. He said, 'first tell me what you would like to drink. Then we will talk.'

The producer ordered room service for soda and ice and sat in front of Umashankar before saying, 'I had never come to this city earlier and I would never have if you were not living here. I have heard that there are many tourist spots here. Apart from that, I have a great desire to go to Puri for a darshan of Lord Jagannath. I could make a round of all the places if you could spare some time for me tomorrow before I catch my plane.' Then he looked at Umashankar and added, 'Of course, only if you want to and have the time.'

Umashankar promised to accompany him the next day and discussed the various places they could visit. Soda and ice came and the producer took out an expensive bottle of Scotch whisky from his suitcase. He prepared a glass and offered it to Umashankar. Then he picked up his own glass and said, 'cheers.'

Umashankar took a sip from the glass and looked out. The weather had been extremely oppressive for the last few days and it was not possible to do any work indoors because of the extreme heat. The tinted glass of the airconditioned room shielded them from the harshness outside. The drink was smooth and the gentleman sitting before him extremely nice and pleasant. All this was a far cry from Umashankar's everyday life.

Then the producer came down to business. He wanted to produce a serial with fifty-two episodes based on Umashankar's novel. Since the novel had been written with the freedom movement as backdrop, it would have a special attraction on the fiftieth anniversary of independent India. It was apparent from the conversation of the producer that he had read the book at least once, if not three times, and that he was familiar with the novel on the whole.

Umashankar said, 'Another producer had met me a few days back for the novel, but he wanted to make a two-and-a-half-hour feature film based on it. Do you think you could stretch the book to make fifty-two episodes of half-hour duration each?'

The producer said, 'The canvas of your novel is vast and widespread and it is full of characters; if it is confined to a film, many characters and incidents would have to be scrapped. But I want the novel to come on the screen in its entirety with nothing left out.'

'But I was thinking from another angle. I don't think that there is so much material in the novel that it can be stretched to twenty-five hours on film.

The producer said, 'We will add a lot of stuff to the novel for that reason. You never thought that the book would be made into a film when you wrote it. Hence, you wrote the story as a literary creation. But we will look at it from the point of view of a film when we write the script. It is quite easy to make a feature film on the book; but when we make a serial, we have to ensure that there is a complete sub-story with some drama and a climax in each episode.'

Umashankar said apprehensively, 'In that case you would have to make a lot of changes in my novel.'

'Don't worry about that. All changes in the story will be sent to you for approval. If anyone shows the maximum respect and pays the most money to writers in the filmdom, it's me. Why should we be miserly when it comes to writers when we spend so much on actors, actresses and technicians? But my friends don't think that way. They say that the writer only writes a four-page story; the first major work for filmmaking is scriptwriting. Hence the scriptwriter should get the money and not the writer. But I don't subscribe to this view.'

The producer filled the empty glasses and said, 'Do you know why I have so much of respect for writers?' He remained quiet for a long time after saying this as if he was ruminating about a distant past. Then he finished his drink in one gulp and reclined back on the sofa with his eyes closed. He lowered his voice and said, 'My father was a writer.'

Umashankar felt drawn towards this unknown man all of a sudden. He took an irrational decision then and there that he would permit only this man to make a film based on his book if ever he permitted anyone.

The producer seemed to be a totally different person when he spoke again, while pouring another drink into his glass. He said, 'We were in Lahore at the time of Partition. My father worked in a minor position in a government office there, but he was basically interested in literature. He spent almost all his spare time reading and writing. He could not really make a mark as an author. Since he moved to a new place in India after Partition, he could no longer devote as much time to writing as he would have liked as he slogged to make both ends meet. But his entire life had been dedicated to literature. Hence, I have always had a weakness, affection and respect for writers.'

Silence reigned for a few moments. When Umanshankar asked him more about his father, the producer said, 'I am sorry I spoke such a great deal about myself. Please forgive me. We couldn't discuss the film either.' He took out an envelope from his briefcase and handing it over to Umashankar, said, 'The agreement is inside; take a look at it. We will sign it tomorrow if you agree to the conditions. But I will pay you the advance right now.'

The cheque that he gave Umashankar had been made out for fifty thousand rupees. Umashankar had never received so much money at any time apart from the award. As he looked at the cheque overwhelmed by the gesture, the producer continued, 'This is only the advance. The total amount to be paid for the book and the money you would get if you associate yourself with scriptwriting are mentioned in the agreement. We will talk about it tomorrow morning after you have gone through the agreement.'

The producer came to the door to see him off when Umashankar rose to leave after some small talk. But he remembered something and said, 'I forgot to ask you whether you would prefer cash instead of the cheque? I would advise you to take cash.' So saying he took out a bundle of currency notes and handed it over to Umashankar.

When Umashankar returned the cheque and asked whether he would need to sign a receipt, the producer

said, 'There is no need for that. I have never had any problem with writers.'

Umashankar read the agreement carefully that night after dinner. But the document was so full of legalese that it was almost unintelligible to him. However, the amounts he had been promised in the agreement were beyond his widest imagination and that gave him an extremely restful sleep that night.

When he read the agreement carefully again the next morning, Umashankar had a fleeting thought that he should have a talk with the other producer before signing the agreement. He now seemed to have renewed faith in his old novel after seeing the huge amounts mentioned in the agreement, and greed overtook him with the thought that there could be even more money in the book. But the other producer had not bothered to telephone him again as promised and he had already accepted the advance from this gentleman. He could of course return the advance, but it would be foolish to let go of the bird in hand. With these thoughts he met the producer at the hotel, the next day.

The producer said, 'We will talk about the details of the serial for some time and then I will check out of the hotel. We could go to Puri after taking a look around your city. I will go straight to the airport when we return from Puri. I promise not to talk shop once we leave the hotel. You must forgive me that I have taken up your valuable time.'

Then the producer apprised him of how the novel would be converted into a serial. He would start work the moment the project was approved by the television authorities. Then everything would proceed like clockwork. It was no easy job to write the script for each episode and send it for screening week after week, so he would set up a team for the purpose. Umashankar was to be paid more money if he took charge of writing the script, but he had to work full-time and go through a learning process for that. The rules governing scriptwriting for serials were different from writing stories and novels. If Umashankar did not write the script, he would

still be consulted from time to time and be paid for his services. When Umashankar said that he would think over writing the script, the producer said, 'I will send you some books on the art of scriptwriting when I go back to Mumbai. You go through them and let me know.'

Umashankar signed the agreement without any further hesitation and gave it back to the producer. The producer said, 'This is only a piece of paper. We are now friends, and should treat each other as such.'

The producer checked out of the hotel and Umashankar showed him the temples and caves of Bhubaneswar. The producer didn't seem much impressed by these. But his demeanour changed completely when they entered the Puri temple. He sat cross-legged with his eyes closed for a long time near the Jayavijaya door and donated a good amount of money to the temple before leaving. The Brahmin accompanying them was also given a fat tip. As they came out and sat in the car, he said, 'I felt a lot of peace coming here. Our serial is hereby dedicated to Lord Jagannath. Now it is His will.'

Instead of talking about the project, the producer talked a great deal about himself on the return journey. Umashankar soon developed a fondness for him, especially after seeing his conduct inside the temple. They enjoyed talking to each other and Umashankar dropped him at the airport. While returning home, he suddenly had doubts about his judgment in surrendering the rights to his novel in so short a time. But the fifty thousand rupees paid to him by the producer was safe in his cupboard and he hadn't even given him a receipt for that. The other producer from Mumbai had also not bothered to telephone again. Umashankar assured himself that he had taken the right decision.

In a few days, a nice letter arrived from the producer saying that he was as much pleased to meet Umashankar as he was impressed with Orissa. He was anxious to visit the Puri temple again. He also sent a few books on soap opera separately to him. He said that he had sent his proposal to

the television authorities and would keep Umashankar informed on the progress and start work on the project as soon as it was approved.

A packet arrived for Umashankar soon after. It contained a lot of books. There were some books on how to write serials for television. Some other books were printed scripts of successful television serials. Umashankar devoted his entire time to reading these books. The technique of writing serials was totally different from the technique of writing stories and novels. Many skills were needed in writing serials in order to hold the attention of the viewer; conflicts and their resolutions had to be incorporated into every half-hour sub-story. The books on successful serials had strictly followed these rules. After reading the books, Umashankar realised that it was beyond him to write the script. He wrote to the producer to inform him that he couldn't spare time for this kind of work, hence, the job may be entrusted to someone else.

A telegram arrived from the producer two days later. It said: 'Thank you for your letter. I will engage one of the best scriptwriters for your great novel. But your cooperation is needed for the purpose. Please let me have your fax number and e-mail address.

Umashankar didn't have the benefit of these modern gadgets; he didn't even have a typewriter. He wrote back that he would render all possible help in scriptwriting.

Things started moving fast thereafter. The producer telephoned Umashankar one night at ten and congratulated him saying that the television authorities had agreed to the serialisation of his novel. Umashankar was happy to receive the news as he was supposed to receive more money as per the agreement on approval of the project by the television authorities. He was also to get some money every week after that as the serial was broadcast on television.

The postman handed over a telegram to him at midnight. Umashankar opened it hesitantly as he was scared that there would be some bad news. It had come from the producer. He informed that the television authorities had approved the

project. But the title *'Uttarayan'* was not acceptable to them since another serial had already been made under that name. The producer asked him to suggest another title for the serial. Finally, he wondered if *'Dakshinayan'* would not be an appropriate alternative.

Umashankar had decided upon the title of the novel after a great deal of thought and deliberation. Uttarayan did not just refer to the gradual progress of the sun towards the north between December and June; it had much greater connotations. The novel dwelt upon the story of Rajnikant whose personal life had been assimilated into the Indian freedom struggle. The travails of a twenty-year old college student over a long fifteen-year period till Independence had been described therein. The north of the summer solstice did not just refer to the direction of this journey; it was the progress of love, emotions, perseverance and struggles of life; north was the ultimate., the best, the highest and the most.

Choosing a new name after all those years was a big challenge for Umashankar. He couldn't think of another suitable name. He received a telephone call a day later from the Mumbai office of the producer saying that they had to send the new name immediately to the television authorities; they would suggest *'Dakshinayan'* if Umashankar had not settled on anything else. Umashankar felt cornered in the circumstances and agreed to this new title.

The work relating to the production of the serial moved at a fast pace after that. The producer repeatedly telephoned Umashankar. He even decided to open an office at Bhubaneswar where the scriptwriting could progress under Umashankar's supervision. He had another motive, he said, in opening such an office. It would help him to come at intervals and pay his respects to Lord Jagannath at Puri. Even though the serial was being made in Hindi, he was going to do a lot of shooting in Orissa as the locale was basically Orissa. Umashankar felt reassured that he would now be able to supervise the filming of his novel even if the title had been changed.

Very soon the producer's man arrived and took up a house on rent. The house was soon furnished with chairs, tables, office equipment, computers, telephone, etc. Umashankar received a letter from the producer in which he had written: 'I had long planned to make a mega film with big stars, and this has now fallen into place. All my time will be taken up by this new film. Hence, I have assigned the job of making the serial to my son. He will meet you very soon. This is his first assignment and I would request you to help and advise him in all possible ways. My friendship with you will remain unaffected and since Lord Jagannath is my lord and master now, I have to make trips to Orissa anyhow. I sincerely hope that both the serial and the film will progress well by the grace of Lord Jagannath.'

The producer's son arrived at Umashankar's house in a few days with a letter from his father and a bottle of Scotch as gift. He introduced himself, saying, 'My name is Aroop Kumar, but everyone calls me A.K. You too may call me by that name.'

AK was extremely handsome and had returned from Harvard a year ago after completing his studies. His behaviour was gentle and decent, but somehow Umashankar was not able to connect him with his father nor did he feel comfortable with him. It was decided that they would discuss the script in the office that afternoon.

Umashankar had been to the office earlier, but now it looked beautiful with the interiors done up. AK introduced him to everyone. Some people were employed to type out the script and take printouts from the computer as also to run the office. The girl looking like a film star and sitting beside AK was Rosie, his secretary. And the bearded youth dressed casually was Udbhrant, the scriptwriter. AK said, "Don't go by Udbhrant's appearance. He is the best scriptwriter in Mumbai. He has written the scripts of both the films that were hits last year even though someone else's name appeared in the credits. He will write the script of *Dakshinayan* under your guidance. Ten other producers would have liked to take him had I not kidnapped him and brought him here."

AK had not read Umashankar's novel although he had read a brief synopsis and had an overall idea about the story. He said,, 'This is a very powerful story: I am going to make a first class serial out of it.'

Umashankar was happy to hear that but he didn't feel so sure when he looked at Udbhrant.

AK could sense his doubts and so he remarked, 'You will soon know the kind of dynamite he is when you talk to him for fifteen minutes. Our serial is going to be a hit for sure.'

Then they discussed the title of the serial and its characters. AK said, 'The title Dakshinayan sounds too heavy. I had seen the dictionary of Monier-Williams. I think Ayan won't be too bad for a title. But we have to definitely change the name of the lead character. Viewers will immediately think of the famous South Indian actor when Rajnikant is mentioned.'

Umashankar said, 'But the readers are familiar with this name.'

AK said, 'The readers of a book are different from the viewers of television. Only a handful of those who would see the serial would have gone through the book. We have to find a name that would go down well with viewers. I left a lot of names with an opinion poll company before leaving Mumbai. They will do a survey and let me know what name will be most acceptable of viewers.

AK stood up and said, 'Rosie and I are leaving for Puri today. Udbhrant will discuss with you his ideas.'

Udbhrant came and sat on a chair near Umashankar after AK had left. He said, 'You have written a great novel. I have only read the Hindi version. Has the book been translated into English?'

When Umashankar answered in the negative, Udbhrant said, 'I would like to translate it. You must not permit anyone else. I have already translated the first page; I will show it to you sometime.'

Umashankar said, 'All right. We'll talk about it later.'

Udbhrant took out a bundle of papers from out of his bag and placed them on the table. He said, 'I have already done a lot of work on your novel. Your novel is no longer a single novel; it is now a collection of fifty-two sub-stories.'

Looking at the papers stacked before him, Umashankar was curious to know how his novel had been broken down into so many parts. But Udbhrant put all the papers back in his bag and said, 'I will discuss everything leisurely with you in the evening.'

Umanshankar looked at him critically. The man looked exactly like his name – a madcap. He consoled himself thinking that the producer was a hardcore businessman; he could not have made a mistake in choosing him.

Udbhrant said, 'I had told them before coming here that I was not going to stay in a hotel. I would rent a separate place. A single room is enough for me, but there has to be a tea-shop and a dhaba nearby. I saw a house this morning. It is exactly what I have wanted. And also in the right place. Luckily, there is also a liquor shop nearby apart from an eating place. How about spending this evening with me?'

Umashankar was eager to know what Udbhrant had done to his novel. Hence, he readily agreed to his proposal. He said, 'Let us go.'

The house into which Udbhrant led Umashankar after getting down from the car could not be described as anything except a single room. There was a bed, a table and two chairs. Udbhrant's suitcase lay open in one corner. There was nothing else in the room except for a jug of water and two glasses on the table. He asked Umashankar to relax and said, 'I will be back in a moment.'

Sitting alone in the empty room, Umashankar thought about the situation in which he had been caught. It was a novel experience for him to get involved with filmmaking. The producer, AK, Rosie, Udbhrant – all of them were from a world outside his own. He was now within their circle. Till today, literature for him had been limited to his study table, his handwritten manuscripts, the smell of fresh paper

and the printing ink of his newly published books and the congregation of admiring readers and critics in meeting halls full of broken chairs. The world he had stepped into now revolved around five-star hotels, Scotch whisky, beautiful people, computers, e-mail and twenty-four pictures every second. Umashankar felt that he was an intruder in this alien wonderland.

Udbhrant came back carrying a load with him. Looking at him Umashankar felt that if he was an unwelcome visitor to this other world, Udbhrant was certainly a dangerous terrorist infiltrating into it. Umashankar however felt comfortable and safe in his presence.

Udbhrant took out the packets and arranged them on the table. He served the eatables on two paper plates and poured two stiff drinks from the bottle of rum into the two glasses. Umashankar remarked, 'We could have used the good whisky that AK had brought for me.'

Udbhrant replied, 'I have settled on rum after a great deal of experimentation. What is the point of spending so much money if the idea is to enjoy a drink?' He added water and offered a glass to Umashankar.

Picking up the other glass and raising it to his lips, he said, 'Here is to the success of Uttarayan.'

Taking his first sip, Umashankar said, 'Not *Uttarayan*, but *Dakshinayan*. And if AK has his way, 'it's only Ayan.'

Udbhrant said, 'What's there in a name? As long as the core of the novel's story and philosophy is not changed, how does it matter if the title is altered a little bit? This has to be accepted in a translation, be it from one language to another or from literature to cinema. Assume that there is another famous novel by that name in the language to which your novel is being translated and no publisher is willing to publish the book with that title. What would you do then?'

Udbhrant had emptied his glass. He refilled it and looked at Umashankar, who had barely taken two sips. As he took another sip, Udbhrant said, 'You must be amazed to see someone like me. But everything goes in Mumbai. Bollywood

would continue to hold me in esteem until such time as my scripts are successful; everyone will put up with my antics. They will run after me when I have two hits, but, will drop me like a hot potato after one flop. This is the simple arithmetic of that place.'

Udbhrant poured a third drink for himself. He continued, 'You must also be wondering about my strange name. But I had to take this name as no one can achieve anything in life with a bland name like Vijay Srivastava. Of course, any name would do once you become successful, but you need a correct name and address before that. However, Udbhrant is also my own name; 'In college, I used to write poetry under this name.'

The man was talking sense, Umashankar thought. He wanted to ask him about the script when Udbhrant took out the bundle of papers from his bag as if he could read his thoughts. He said, 'I will read to you the script of the first two episodes.' Then he turned sombre and began to read. It was the sub-story with dialogues and Udbhrant was reading it wholly engrossed, lost to the world. The way he read it was so dramatic and effective that Umashankar felt totally absorbed and the story that he had himself written long back brought a new exhilaration to him.

The two of them remained quite for a while after Udbhrant stopped reading. He refilled both the glasses again. Umashankar was getting a hold over himself now. Suppressing his emotions, he said, 'But the story did not progress along these lines in my novel. Rajnikant had problems with his father alright, but what you have described did not take place in my novel.'

Udbhrant asked him in turn, 'As the creator of Rajnikant, don't you think that something like this might have happened in his life? Or may be something like this had occurred, but you chose to write about a different aspect instead?'

Umashankar conceded that Udbhrant was right. The way he had chalked out Rajnikant's character in the novel was reflected in Udbhrant's writing. Rather the character had

become even more vivid and focused in his script. Udbhrant said 'The novel is your child, your progeny. I want to make it clear that I am only rearing it. I have no right to change it. Hence, I will not take any liberties whatsoever with the characters of your novel or the soul of the story.' Then Udbhrant explained why he had created a different kind of situation. His words seemed to be straight out of the leaves of manuals dealing with the techniques of writing serials. The exchange of words between Rajnikant and his father seemed like high drama and his departure from the village by train seemed a minor climax. Udbhrant also explained that the train would remain like a metaphor in the serial, and signify *Uttarayan* or progression.

Umashankar generally agreed with Udbhrant's dramatisation even if he had his own reservations and would perhaps have done it differently. The making of films and serials had its own rules that could not be bent by the originality of literary work. He was curious to know how his story was progressing in the hands of Udbhrant. But it was getting late and he didn't have any further patience to stay on. He asked about the subject matter of the second episode instead of listening to the entire script. Udbhrant replied that Rajnikant would have a confrontation with the principal of the college in that episode.

There was no such incident in Umashankar's novel. So he was unhappy to hear this. Udbhrant seemed to have sensed what was going on through his mind. He said, 'Be assured your novel will remain safe in my hands. I will not do anything which will bring about a basic change in the characters or the plot of your novel. My only responsibility is to make your original novel acceptable on television. I will write a script that will make you feel proud.'

Umashankar returned home in an irritated mood and decided that he would forget his novel. He had sold the book and they could do whatever they wanted. He would not get involved with its day-to-day scripting. But, as per the agreement, he was to get money as advisor to scriptwriting.

He had to keep contact with Udbhrant for that. But he would give him a free hand. He didn't have the patience to argue any further with him since, as a successful scriptwriter, Udbhrant had the right to decide what was best for screening on the television.

Udbhrant was already there by the time he reached the producer's office the next day. He had sat through the night and corrected the scripts of the first two episodes; the office staff would now type them and take printouts. The Mumbai people would start shooting when the script reached them. Umashankar noticed that everything was being undertaken on a war-footing. These people knew their jobs, he thought. Perhaps a good artistic serial would finally be made in spite of the many changes brought about in his novel.

He got the typewritten script that evening. Many more changes had been made from what Udbhrant had read out to him the last evening. He would definitely have said that the script was good were it not for the fact that he himself had written the original story. Some of the events described in the script were simply not there in his novel and others had been grossly exaggerated. Udbhrant explained to him that this was unavoidable while making a film out of a literary work, and film directors often took great liberties even with major classics. He gave him examples of stories by Rabindranath Tagore made into films by Satyajit Ray. Umashankar admitted that he was right, but that did not help him to cheer up.

AK arrived in a few days. He, and especially Rosie, loved Puri. For his father, Puri meant the Jagannath temple, but for them it was the beaches. Umashankar was present at the meeting in the office when AK informed that the opinion poll had agreed on '*Dakshinayan*' as the title and proposed Mayank as the name of the hero. There was a sudden constriction in Umashankar's chest. He had spent every moment of two years with Rajnikant while writing the novel; he had gone to jail with him, he had laughed and cried in his happiness and sorrow. Where had this Mayank come from all of a sudden?

But, instead of saying that, Umashankar said, 'But this is not a familiar name in Orissa.'

AK said, 'I am sorry, I forgot to tell you that we are not going to show this as a story from Orissa. We are going to make the hero universal; he may belong to any part of India.'

Umashankar replied, 'A character can be made universal even after showing him in his distinct, limited milieu.'

AK said, 'We have to think of the viewers. Our objective is to get all-India acceptance for the characters. You might have noticed that in Hindi movies the hero is simply named Raj or Vijay. That makes him belong to any place in India. Besides, our serial is being made in Hindi and not in Oriya. Hence, it has no relationship with Orissa.'

AK shuffled his papers and continued, 'As per the report of the opinion poll, seventy-three per cent of the people like the name Mayank. The pollsters have given a short remark on it: "It is indeed a happy coincidence that the words Rajnikant and Mayank mean the same thing."

Umashankar was about to say that an author does not go by the meaning of a word while naming a character, but he remained quiet.

AK informed them that everything was going as per schedule and work would progress even faster when they completed the shooting of the first two episodes and got the nod of approval from the television authorities. AK closed the meeting and left for Puri.

Umashankar decided not to worry about the script any longer, but Udbhrant kept bothering him at intervals, seeking his opinion on various matters. The man had unlimited capacity for work. After drinking steadily till midnight, he would write without going to bed and in the morning hand over the papers for typing. He would come to Umashankar with the typed papers in the evenings to discuss certain points with him. Even though Umashankar didn't like it in the least that Udbhrant should take so much liberty with the events and characters of his novels, yet he was happy that Udbhrant was totally involved with the novel and in spite of

his interference the events and characters of the novel were still within the confines defined by Umashankar. Initially, he would discuss the script with Udbhrant, but later he only listened to him with indifference, and stopped giving him any advice or making any comments.

Seeing his apathy, Udbhrant too stopped visiting him daily, and met him at infrequent intervals. But Umashankar would drop in at the office now and then least they forgot that he was the script consultant. The producer too didn't default in making payments to him on the due dates. Umashankar reconciled himself to the fact that the novel no longer belonged to him; he had sold it and thus had no say in the atrocities committed on it by the buyer.

Udbhrant finished writing all the fifty-two episodes and everything was fed into the computer. One morning Udbhrant came to Umashankar with a huge bound book. He said, 'This is the final shape of the fifty-two episodes of your novel. Please go through it and give your comment; we can make revisions on the computer quite easily.'

Umashankar looked at the last page of the book. Udbhrant had ended the script the same way as Umashankar. Even though there was no scene of a railway station in the novel, at the end of the script, Rajniknat was shown taking a train on 14 August 1947, leaving behind everyone. His last dialogue was the same as in the novel: "India will be independent tomorrow. My work is over. I am not going to look back."

Instead of commenting on any of these, Umashankar said, 'Why are you still writing Rajnikant when it has been decided that the hero would be named Mayank?'

Udbhrant said, 'Let them do whatever they want to do. As far as I am concerned, Rajnikant is the hero of the story. Hence, I have kept that name in my script. The name can be changed from Rajnikant to Mayank in a moment on the computer. That is their problem.'

Umashankar concluded that this man was really an ardent devotee of his novel. He offered him tea and decided that he would talk to him for some more time. Udbhrant had a

six-month contract with the producer, but he had finished the work in two months. He wanted to go back to Mumbai and start some other work there if the producer agreed. But, in such work, one had to keep on modifying the script a number of times for a variety of reasons. He might have to sit it out for that. He said he would use the time in translating the novel into English.

The secretary who accompanied AK on his next visit was called Shabnam. They were in a hurry to go to Puri; hence, a meeting was hastily called that day. AK informed that the television authorities had liked the pilot project of the two episodes submitted to them and they were likely to approve a hundred episodes for the serial instead of fifty-two. Therefore, they had to think afresh about everything and the script had to be rewritten from the beginning. Umashankar found this extremely illogical, but he kept quiet. But Udbhrant said that the novel could not be extended beyond fifty-two episodes.

AK said, 'Even if I have not read the novel, I have read its synopsis. It has come to an end at the time of Independence. As per the opinion poll, the serial will be a hit if it is given the shape of a political story. All the events described in the novel relate to the Gandhi era. We can drag the story till Nehru and even up to Indira Gandhi if we get approval for a hundred episodes.'

Umashankar didn't utter a word even though he felt grievously pained at these words. Udbhrant said, 'But I do not want to be associated with such a project. I have already written whatever I had to write. I will make whatever changes are required in that, but I do not at all subscribe to your hundred-episode proposal.'

AK said, 'It's all right. We will talk about it again when I return from Puri after two days.'

As they emerged from the office, Udbhrant advised Umashankar, 'Don't agree to this proposal under any circumstance. They want to give a fake to the television using your name and book. You cancel your agreement with

them on this count. I will get you much better producers from Mumbai.'

Umashankar said, 'This is not possible.'

Umashankar went over the agreement with a toothcomb when he returned home that night. It had been clearly mentioned in the document that the producer could shorten, refine, change or lengthen the story for telecasting on the television and that he might omit characters from the novel or add new characters and that he could even change the storyline. The producer had all the rights with regards to the telecast of the story once Umashankar had signed the agreement. It depressed him very much but he decided that he would no longer get involved in this matter. He hoped to get the entire money promised to him and let the producer do whatever he wanted with the story.

Udbhrant arrived at his house the next morning and again broached the subject. He asked, 'What have you decided?'

Instead of talking about the terms of the agreement, Umashankar told him, 'I am a writer; cinema and television are not for me. My work is over with writing the novel and getting it published; that is the end of the matter. I am least bothered whether someone translates it or makes a drama or a film or a serial out of it afterwards.'

Udbhrant was agitated to hear him speak thus and said, 'How can you say that? You are the creator. Your novel is like your child. Would you want someone to kill your child, maim it? The duties of parents are not over after giving both to a child, they have to rear and protect the child. Why can't you understand this being a writer yourself?'

Umashankar didn't like what he heard. Irritated, he said, 'Is that child my son any longer? You are the first person to have ravished it. I am not prepared to take any responsibility for the bastard child you have created by deleting certain characters and events from the novel and adding new ones in their place. Your script is not my baby it is yours. You take care of it.'

Udbhrant fell quiet all of a sudden. He said, 'There is always a father even when the child is a bastard. Okay, I will abide by you. I will guard my script even if you do not protect your novel. But you must remember that the responsibility of the writer or the parents is not over with the completion of writing or after the child is born.'

A major event had taken place by the time AK returned from Puri and met them again: the two films for which Udbhrant had written the scripts had bombed at the box-office and ran no longer than a few days. The other producers eager to seek his services had informed him that they no longer needed him. AK also told Udbhrant right before everyone that he was getting two other scriptwriters from Mumbai. Udbhrant could assist them in the job since he had a contract for six months, but if he wanted, he was free to take full payment and leave.

Udbhrant said, 'I would like to work with the new writers who are going to work on my script. I will complete my six months here.'

AK replied, 'As you wish.'

AK looked at Umashankar and said, 'I have also thought about the post-Independence episodes. If you have any objections in this regard, the first fifty-two episodes would go under the name '*Dakshinayan I*' and the second lot would go as '*Dakshinayan II*'. You may choose not to associate yourself with the second part if you so wish. All these have been incorporated in details in a new agreement. We will pay you at the same rate if you agree to be our advisor for '*Dakshinayan II.*' What do you say?'

Without looking at Udbhrant, Umashankar said, 'I would also like to be associated with the second part.'

AK continued, 'I won't be able to come here so often any longer since I have to supervise the production work. But the scriptwriters I would be sending are experienced people. I am confident we will be able to make a very successful serial. Dad may come to Puri some time. Shabnam doesn't seem to like Puri.'

Umashankar kept to himself after AK's departure although he was receiving his money regularly. The new scriptwriters had arrived from Mumbai and were engaged in their work. Udbhrant came to him from time to time and informed him that he was no longer assisting the scriptwriters. However, he had not severed the relationship since he wanted to know about the changes they were planning to make. They were playing havoc with the script and Udbhrant was afraid that finally a serial would be made which had no link with the original novel.

Since Umashankar didn't enquire about the revised script, Udbhrant asked, 'Would you like to hear about the changes they are making? In the first episode, Rajnikant or Mayank steals his father's revolver before leaving home. He and his friends in the college learn the art of making bombs. This is the kind of character that has now been imparted to your non-violent hero. Want to hear more? His friend Harish dies in the fifth episode.'

Each word of Udbhrant seemed like a whiplash to Umashankar. He said, 'Harish was alive in my novel till the very end. Why should he die?'

Udbhrant said, 'Why do you ask me? Go, ask them. Would you remain quiet in spite of all this?

Umashankar was now a broken man. He simply nodded, 'Yes.'

A few weeks later, Udbhrant reached dead drunk at Umashankar's house late at night. He took out a bundle of papers from his bag and placed it before him saying, 'This is the complete changed script. They have asked me to comment on it. Everything has been fed into the computer. They will think it over if I suggest any changes and make the modifications which they seem fit. Otherwise, this will go to Mumbai for shooting. The two episodes filmed earlier will be scrapped and shooting will start as per the new script.'

Udbhrant turned the pages sitting before Umashankar. He said, 'All the train scenes have been deleted from this. Mayank has a girlfriend now while your novel had no such

character. They believe that the viewers won't be interested in seeing a serial without a powerful female character. She will be one of the major characters in the serial. And do you know what happens in the last scene? Mayank and his friends sit underneath a calendar of the month of August when Mayank says, 'Independence is imminent. But we still have a long way to go."

Umashankar still remained silent. Gathering the papers, Udbhrant remarked, 'This scene will be the advertisement for '*Dakshinayan II.*' How do you like all this?'

Umashankar didn't say anything despite being greatly agitated.

Udbhrant said, 'You may or may not do anything. But I will not permit this script to be filmed. I had found out from the office that the script with me is the only printout they have taken. They do not have another copy; it's there only in the disc of the computer. The film cannot be made if I burn this printout and destroy the computer disc.' Udbhrant looked at him but Umashankar kept quiet, as though having lost his senses.

Udbhrant asked, 'Which petrol pump do you think would be open now?'

Umashankar didn't comprehend the objective behind the question but to get rid of the drunken fellow, he said, 'The one near the main market might be open.'

Udbhrant stood up unsteadily after shoving the papers back into his bag. He was unsteady on his legs. He said, 'Give me an empty bottle if you have one. I think I will go to the office before returning home.'

# Patron Saint

MALLIKA HAD never imagined that she would one day wish to die like a character from some tragic story. And that, of all things, a book of fiction would provide her with the courage and support to continue to live. Mallika had thought that she was done with her life the day Abhay walked out of her world. Everything seemed meaningless and she lived in a state of void after that. She had nothing else to receive from this world; her life had no meaning. She withdrew from the joys and sorrows of living. Her only thought was to somehow get deliverance from her useless and aimless existence.

But it is not given to one to decide the span of one's life. It is perhaps easy to take a decision to commit suicide, but extremely difficult to actually do it. Mallika weighed the different options of taking her life, but she was not comfortable with any. Her only aim now was to find an easy and infallible way of committing suicide. She read many articles on the subject, but none of the methods described seemed suitable or convenient.

Even though time was a great healer, Mallika was determined never to compromise with her desire to take her life. She read Abhay's letters yet again the moment she felt a weakening of her resolve, and she became even more determined. Abhay had written:' You too must have realised like me during our recent meetings that we no longer have the kind of relationship we had earlier. Rather than blame each other for what has gone sour, we must admit that we do not love each other any more.

She marvelled at the ease with which Abhay had written this. Mallika was not aware of any such terminal crisis in their relationship until she had received the letter. Of course, there were some sharp exchanges of words between them on trivial matters in their last few meetings, but it was beyond Mallika's imagination that matters would come to such a pass. She had not been able to trust her eyes when she had read the letter the first time. While opening the letter she had hoped that there would be assurances of a rapprochement in the letter Abhay had sent a long time after their last meeting. When she had read the letter again, it felt as if the earth had receded from under her feet; there was no further meaning to her life.

She had cried for two days behind closed doors. When she tried to contact him, she learnt that Abhay had left town without informing anyone. Consequently, Mallika had decided that there was no purpose in her living. She severed all relations with her family and shut herself inside her room, and started looking for an easy and sure way to take her life.

Everyone at home was aware of her relationship with Abhay and no one approved of it. They could sense that there was a crisis in the relationship. When Mallika shunned everyone and kept to her room, they seemed relieved that she had got out of an unequal relationship. The least Mallika had hoped for was some sympathy from her own folks, but their apathy strengthened her resolve.

Mallika came across *Mahajeevan* while she was thus engulfed in such reflections on life. The novel had been with her for quite some time, but she had not read it until then. The title of the book made her pick it up that day. She opened the book and read the first line; 'For whom is this life of mine?' And a shiver ran down her spine. Even though she didn't know anything about the book, she felt as if it had been written for her, and Providence had decreed that the book should reach her at this moment.

Som Prakash's *Mahajeevan* had been written almost fifty years earlier, and it was one of the most widely read and

discussed novels of the time. It had acquired the status of a classic soon after its publication and the novel had influenced an entire generation of writers. The book received rave reviews from critics and also being of popular interest, it swiftly went through several editions. The book was translated into most languages. More than one book was written on the novel, and essays were still being published on its philosophical, social and political content.

Som Prakash wrote a few books after *Mahajeevan*, but they were all rather ordinary. *Mahajeevan* took him to the peak of success and his literary and personal advancement and success was rooted in it. Som Prakash was often aggrieved that all his other works were considerd trite in comparison to *Mahajeevan* and his identity was known by this solitary creation alone. He was often amazed that the opus which had brought him glory all these years had been written by him at the rather callow age of twenty-six.

But Mallika was not aware of all this. She never had much interest in literature and had read very few books. There were a few books on her shelf, but she had made no efforts to go through them. But once she started reading *Mahajeevan* she could not put it down. A young man and a young woman like her were the main characters in the book. It contained the emotional outbursts of characters who were constantly stirred by social, political, psychological and physical changes; the wild wailings of young souls who could not disentangle themselves from the problems and impositions at social and personal levels. As she turned page after page, Mallika felt as if every page and every word reflected her own experience and agony.

Mallika also felt strange changes taking palce inside her continuously as she read the book. The burden of sorrow and sadness that had settled on her psyche seemed to melt away layer by layer to unburden and free her mind. It was as if someone was opening one window after another in a closed, suffocating house. An unanticipated joy of living permeated her soul. She had no doubts now that the black clouds would

have receded completely and the sun would be shining brightly by the time she finished the book.

And, finally, that came to pass. She was a totally different person by the time she finished reading the last page of *Mahajeevan*. She came out of her room and talked with everyone in her usual manner. She telephoned her friends. She went shopping. She saw movies. Mallika now wanted to pick up the joys of every moment with both hands, just the way a patient recovering from a long illness starts enjoying life with renewed vigour. She seemed to have been reborn after a predictable death. Everyone at home was now showering her with love and affection and Mallika was enjoying the happy beginnings of her second life. She no longer thought of the past while she slept; she thought of the next morning and the day after, which now were full of promises.

One day she went to a bookshop and bought all the books by Som Prakash. She read a collection of short stories from the lot, but there was neither any flow in the stories nor any fascinating character or plot. She kept it aside and picked up a book of poems. Some of the lines of a few poems touched a chord in her, but the book could not provide her with wholesome pleasure. Irritated, she again opened *Mahajeevan* and was filled with ecstasy as she read a page at random.

She would now go to the bookshop regularly and leaf through books. She would open books at random and read a couple of lines here and there. But her hope of getting a ray of life's contemplations from some stray page to illuminate her mind came to a nought. In the end, she returned home after buying all the books that had been published on the works of Som Prakash. The books were a critical assessment of the writings of Som Prakash and especially *Mahajeevan*. They discussed the characters and events of *Mahajeevan* from different angles. But Mallika could not find anything new in these books which she herself had not discovered earlier. However, she came to know a lot about Som Prakash from the books and decided to meet the great writer personally.

It was not difficult to locate him since Som Prakash was now president of a national literary establishment. Approbations and honours had followed him after the publication of *Mahajeevan*. He had been a young freedom fighter, and could have played a role in politics and Independence. But his decision to shun politics and dedicate his life to literature had then been described as proof of his sacrifice and greatness. Even if his later works were not all that good, he had received awards for all these books, and had the honour of being the head of different organisations, member of various committees and visiting professor of many universities. *Mahajeevan* was also acclaimed overseas through translations and Som Prakash spent a great deal of time travelling. He was the star attraction in any overseas literary delegation from India. Foreign writers made it a point to meet him when they visited India. Different organisations vied with each other to get him to preside over literary meets and award-giving committees. Literary magazines were gratified to publish even a letter from him when they failed to solicit an article. Many people did not consider him such a great writer because of the scantiness and inconsistency of his complete oeuvre, but there were no two opinions on his being the greatest literary personality of the country.

Som Prakash did have a few critics who would try to run him down. They had hunted out little-known foreign books from which the characters, plot and events of *Mahajeevan* had been lifted. Stories also made the rounds about the devious methods and artifices through which he managed to get different awards and positions. It was also being said that he always supported those in power. But these criticisms were limited, and they had no effect on the common man as far as his overall image was concerned. At times Som Prakash refused to accept certain awards, honours or positions and passed caustic comments against the establishment, unnerving the critics and making them beat a hasty retreat.

As she sat down to write a letter to Som Prakash, Mallika was filled with a strange sensation – as if through this piece

of paper she was going to worship in person the venerated author whom she had met only in the pages of the book until now. Describing how she had received a new lease of life through *Mahajeevan*, she sought to meet Som Prakash in person to express her gratitude. She was terribly disappointed when she did not receive any reply from him for a long time. She concluded that he must have a large fan following of both the sexes and it would be routine for him to receive letters from unknown admirers. It was surely silly of her to expect a reply from such a famous man.

Mallika was delighted beyond imagination when she received a letter from Som Prakash a few days later. Som Prakash had written the letter himself. The language of the letter was extremely friendly and his courtesy befitted his fame. He had sent many good wishes for young Mallika and an invitation to visit him some time with prior appointment.

But it was not really easy to communicate with Som Prakash. He lived in a village about forty miles from the town, and it was difficult to get in touch there on telephone. Sometimes the voice on the phone was barely audible while at other times Som Prakash was not available when the line went through. Mallika decided that she would visit the place without wasting any more time on the phone.

Som Prakash had been a Gandhian before Independence. He later took to Marxism and the Naxals, but now claimed that he had reverted to Gandhi. He stayed in a house built like an ashram on the outskirts of the village. The house was supposedly owned by a trust, but only Som Prakash used it. His wife had expired a long time back and his children lived in the USA. Hence, the ashram was a convenient arrangement for Som Prakash. A famous architect had designed the house and a rich industrialist had funded its construction. From the outside, it looked liked a village hut with earthen walls plastered with cowdung, but all modern amenities including air-conditioning was provided. The house had become as famous as Som Prakash himself and students of architecture often visited this unique architectural marvel.

Mallika reached the place in her car and went up to the reception room at the entrance where a petty official sat as in a government office. He offered a chair to Mallika and informed her that Som Prakash was busy at the time with an American lady who was writing his biography. He, however, offered to find out if he could spare some time for her. Mallika was a bit disappointed. The place was totally different from the idea she had formed about things after reading *Mahajeevan* and about Som Prakash. She imagined an elderly writer standing in his garden, contemplating philosophically before his flower plants; now she felt as if she had entered a government office. The only relief was provided by the shelves of book lining the walls. There were books everywhere and she could also see racks of books in the next room through the open door. That was some consolation for Mallika.

The secretary came back and informed her that Som Prakash would be busy for the next two months. The American researcher had come to India only for a few days, hence, Som Prakash would be dedicating all his time to her. Then he was scheduled to go to Tashkent for fifteen days as a member of a cultural delegation. It was possible to meet him only after that. Disappointed, Mallika returned home, leaving her address and telephone number with the secretary. She realised that she should not have gone there without prior appointment. The whole episode was unpleasant, and Mallika wondered whether the experience of meeting Som Prakash would be any better. Great men look completely different from close quarters. She remembered reading somewhere that poets were divine in history, but the poet living next door was joke!

Mallika was amazed to receive a telephone call two days later from Som Prakash himself. He apologised for not being able to meet her the other day and expressed a desire to meet her as soon as possible. It was decided that Mallika would me4et him the following morning. As she kept down the phone Mallika was overjoyed at her good fortune. Som Prakash

had telephoned her on his own! Of course, his voice sounded rather gruff on the phone which was at total variance with Mallika's imagination, but she put it down to the faulty telecommunication. Mallika was overwhelmed by the affection shown by him.

Som Prakash had telephoned her for the simple reason that he had seen a huge Mercedez leaving his house after he had declined to meet the visitor. He inquired about the girl and found Mallika was the daughter of an aristocratic, rich industrialist of the city. Thereafter he dug out her letter and telephoned her.

This time Som Prakash was waiting for her when she reached his place. Mallika was disappointed at the first sight. The thin, emaciated and short old man had decked himself up to look the picture of success. His hair was dyed too dark, his clothes were super white and dazzling as would befit a writer and he had put on a strong perfume. His movements and conversation were measured and artificial. It was as if she was not seeing a writer but a successful actor performing the role of a writer. However, she forced herself to banish these thoughts and concentrated on her patron saint.

All said and done, Som Prakash did have the power of winning over people through his words. He again apologised to Mallika for not having met her the other day. He asked about her background and enquired about her well-being. When Mallika reminded him that *Mahajeevan* had saved her life, Som Prakash said, 'We will talk about it later; let's talk of other things first.'

Then he sent for tea and himself prepared a cup for her. His secretary entered to announce that someone had come to meet him.

Som Prakash said, 'Tell him that I am busy now in an extremely important meeting-'

Once the secretary left, Som Prakash looked at Mallika and said, 'You must be, thinking that I have lied. But the most important work for me now is to talk to you.-,

Som Prakash indeed was behaving as if Mallika was an extraordinary guest and he had no other work at the moment but to talk to her and entertain her.

The American lady emerged from inside the house and joined them. Som Prakash introduced Louise Lawton from San Francisco who had come to India to write his biography. He had perhaps given time to her to come for a discussion as Louise seemed a bit disappointed to see Mallika with him.

Som Prakash told her, 'If you have no objection, you may ask your question before Mallika. My life is an open book; I would not mind talking about myself before others.'

But Louise kept quite; perhaps she didn't want to interview him in someone else's presence. Feeling uncomfortable, Mallika said, 'Let me take leave in that case; you may give your interview.'

Som Prakash said, 'The westerners are always concerned about their own work. I am talking to a guest of mine, but the lady is bothered how she can extract information out of me for her book.'

Louise said, 'You had fixed this time yourself.'

Hiding his irritation with a smile, Som Prakash said, 'I had no idea that Mallika would arrive when I gave you the appointment. Now that Mallika is here, I consider it more important to talk to her rather than giving you an interview.'

The conversation faded off and there was a sense of unease in the air. Finally, Som Prakash said to Louise, 'I'll give you some of my early writings which you may go through now.'

He went inside and came back with a bunch of magazines to tell Louise – "These will keep you busy for a whole day at least. And do include Mallika in the list of my acquaintances you wanted to interview.'

He wrote down Mallika's address and telephone number and gave the paper to Louise, conveying with his actions that she should take leave. But Louise continued to sit there and read the magazines. Somehow Mallika found the situation

uncomfortable. As if reading her mind, Som Prakash said, 'Come, I will show you my garden.'

Leaving Louise behind, Som Prakash led Mallika outside the house. As they were walking through the house, Mallika noticed that there were books everywhere. Som Prakash said, 'Paper is my weakness. There is no paper relating to my life which I have not saved. I have shown many of these papers to researchers. Yet there are papers which are not for public consumption. I have to decide whether I should show them to Louise or not.'

Mallika replied, 'If you trust the lady, then you should cooperate with her all the way.'

Som Prakash said, 'I too feel the same way. American researchers are more hardworking than our researchers and they give a lot of importance to their work. I am sure Louise will write a nice book on me. She had read all my books in the original and has collected all the articles written about me. But how much can these Americans understand us?

They were in the garden now. Mallika was amazed to find that Som Prakash had considerable knowledge about plants. He seemed to have a personal relationship with each seedling, plant and flower. Pointing at a plant, Som Prakash said, 'I had planted this a month back. When the leaves first appeared, I used to observe it daily to see how it was growing. If I woke up in the middle of the night sometime, I came with a torch in hand to assure myself that the leaves were alright.'

They wandered through the garden and finally reached the gate. Mallika's car and driver were waiting outside. Som Prakash suddenly said, 'Stay back for the day, and have lunch with me. If you have time, we could go together in the evening to a literary meet where I have to be present.' He paused and said, 'Of course, if you do not have any other important work.'

The invitation was unexpected for Mallika and she was overwhelmed by the gesture. Her only work was to attend her father's office every now and then. She was the president

of one of the companies and there was a special cabin for her in the office. She had no work to do, and she used the cabin to sit by herself and write letters or telephone Abhay. She had not gone to the office for a long time in the recent past. She agreed to Som Prakash's request. She informed the driver that she would spend the whole day at the place.

Som Prakash first of all ordered for Mallika's lunch after coming inside and also made arrangement for the driver's lunch. He then said to Mallika, 'I will show you my library, but let us first find out how poor Louise is doing. She has no other interest in life apart from her research.'

They found Louise reading the magazines attentively and making notes. When Louise saw Som Prakash, she asked, 'Shall we take up that half-finished interview now?'

Som Prakash looked at Mallika as if there was a secret conspiracy between the two and told Louise, 'I don't feel like doing it now. Since you are staying here, we can do that any time, but Mallika won't come here every day.'

In this manner Som Prakash charmed Mallika by his extreme courtesy and overindulgence. Louise joined them for lunch, but didn't talk much. She seemed to be thinking of her research all the time. When the time came to leave for the meeting, they decided to go in Mallika's car rather than wait for the organisers' car. As they were about to leave, Som Prakash turned towards Louise and said, 'I am going with Mallika. You may come later with the organisers.'

Som Prakash could see her disappointment, and said, 'I am sure talking to them would help you in your research.'

On reaching the meeting place, Som Prakash was surrounded and taken over by his admirers. He tried to keep Mallika near him and introduced her to everyone around but these people gradually dragged him away. Mallika too extricated herself from this circle and took a seat in the third row when the meeting started. She noticed that, sitting on the president's chair, Som Prakash seemed to be looking for someone in the crowd. The meeting started and lectures were delivered, but Som Prakash's attention seemed to be rivetted

on the audience. Finally, he saw Mallika and a smile appeared on his face. Mallika noticed that his gaze was fixed on her. Even when he stood up to deliver the presidential address, his talk seemed to be directed at her. People clapped many times during his lectures, but Mallika was so conscious of Som Prakash's attention that she was totally engrossed in his overt messages directed at her rather than the lecture itself.

Som Prakash freed himself from his admirers and joined Mallika at end of the meeting and both of them located Louise. It was decided that they would go together and Mallika would be dropped off en route. When Mallika alighted from the car at her house, Som Prakash too got down, and holding her hand, said, 'You could not say your piece today; you had to listen to me. I will call you soon to listen to your tale. I won't utter even a woud that day.'

Lying on her bed that evening, Mallika went over the day's happenings. The day passed off very well and brought with it a totally novel experience for her. Though she was unable to assess Som Prakash properly and though he seemed quite ordinary at times, his attitude towards her was extremely pleasing. She was highly impressed by his lifestyle. The evening's meeting confirmed that he was held in as high an esteem by the public as he was by Mallika after she had read *Mahajeevan*. Som Prakash was indeed a legend and any woman would consider herself fortunate to be close to him. She felt drawn to him though she was no writer, she was not even a good reader, and this was no small matter.

The next morning she thought she would telephone Som Prakash. But she thought again, 'What right have I to bother an eminent person after a day's acquaintance?' He had spared a day for her; but that did not mean that she could make demands on his time as and when she felt like it. She had seen how eager people were to meet him. Besides, she hoped that he himself would telephone her again.

She however telephoned him on her own when she didn't receive any call from him the next day. She got through to him with a lot of difficulty and before she could say anything,

he said, 'I have been trying to contact you on phone since yesterday. I had a lovely time with you that day.'

Mallika replied, I called you to tell you the same thing. You gave me a lot of time that day, please allow me to express my gratitude for that.'

Som Prakash said, 'I hope you were not bored at that literary meet that day. We could not talk later that night.'

Mallika replied, 'I wanted to ask you something about the discussion that took place that day.'

Som Prakash said, 'We will talk about that when we meet again.'

Mallika thought that he would invite her to come over immediately, but when that did not happen, she asked on her own, 'Shall I come today?'

Som Prakash answered, 'I am slightly busy today and tomorrow. You can come the day after.'

Mallika was a bit disappointed to hear that. But then it was too much to expect a busy man like him would meet her immediately.

When she reached his house two days later, Som Prakash was busy with Louise in her work with a tape recorder before them. When he saw Mallika, he came to her and giving her a set of his books, asked her to wait for a while in the adjacent room. Mallika had gone through those books earlier and none of them had made any impression on her. She kept the books aside and looked around. Various mementos and citations presented to Som Prakash were arranged on the mantelpiece. He could be seen with the President, the Prime Minister and other distinguished people from India and other countries in the photographs decorating the walls. The presence of an ordinary girl in the house of such a famous man seemed strange to Mallika. He was perhaps showering so much affection on her because of his kindness, but was it right on her part to take advantage of that?

Som Prakash and Louise entered at that moment. Louise looked happy; perhaps, her work had progressed well that morning. Som Prakash said, 'No Indian critic has ever asked

me the kind of profound questions on *Mahajeevan* that Louise asked me today.'

Lousie seemed to be gratified on hearing that. Som Prakash now turned his attention from Louise to Mallika. He said, 'We drove by the river that evening in your car after dropping you off. Your car must have returned pretty late that day. I should have informed you about it earlier.'

Mallika replied, 'It's not important. There is no dearth of cars for me.'

Som Prakash said, 'It is a problem when someone stays so far from the city and doesn't have a car.'

Mallika said, 'I will send you a car whenever you need.'

Som Prakash said, 'No, why should I bother you for such small things?'

Mallika said, 'Keep this telephone number; a car will reach you any time you make a call on this number.'

Louise talked of various things that day at lunch. Mallika gathered from the talk that she had come to India a number of times earlier and was very much familiar with the traditions and literature of the country. She seemed to be a quiet, nice lady. Malllika had not been able to appreciate Som Prakash's attitude towards her the other day. But she found him being extremely nice to her that day as they left together to continue with their work.

As he saw Mallika off, he said, 'I couldn't talk properly to you even today. But you have to come again at least under this pretext!'

Mallika returned home disappointed for she had expected to talk to him about her failed love and acknowledge her debt to *Mahajeevan*.

Her problem relating to Abhay had disappeared from Mallika's mind now; but she was yet to reclaim her normal self. Her relation with Som Prakash had given rise to another problem in her life in the last few days. She visited his house a number of times but returned each time with some unpleasant memories. Louise was perhaps the cause of it; she seemed extremely unhappy by Mallika's visits as it perhaps

disturbed her schedule. Louise was a guest in Som Prakash's house and also his constant companion, perhaps she didn't want anyone else to encroach upon his time.

Mallika had unrestricted entry to Som Prakash's house these days. One day she entered the study all of a sudden and found Som Prakash and Louise sitting very close to each other. She turned around to leave them alone. But Som Prakash got up and made her sit near him and spent the entire day with her. Louise went around the house with a sullen face the whole day. She was scheduled to return to America in a few days' time and Mallika decided to tell Som Prakash her story when he was alone after Louise had left.

Som Prakash had never shown any interest in her personal matters all these days, but he had collected a lot of information from her about her family and their business empire. Mallika introduced him to her father at his request and even though her father had no taste for literature, he was happy that Mallika had found release from a louse like Abhay and come in contact with such a famous person.

Som Prakash was now planning to set up a new trust for his books, manuscripts and other papers, since the objectives of the existing trust were different. Although many organisations in India and overseas were interested in his papers, he wanted Mallika to take charge of the work. Mallika's family was to bear the cost of constructing a building in the city for the trust to store his papers and documents. Som Prakash's study was also planned to be set up there. A chartered accountant from Mallika's company was entrusted with the job of setting up the trust.

The day before Louise was to return to America, Mallika invited her and Som Prakash for lunch at her house. Louise looked sad. She said that though she had completed the major portion of her work, there was still a lot left to be done. But she would soon start writing the book using the materials she had already gathered. She said that every researcher decides at some point of time to put a stop to any further research. Mallika thought this statement also

applied to life's journey. A human being also had to decide on the limits of her or his quest. Louise talked only of her proposed book those days. She had also decided on a title for the book: A Life at Large. Som Prakash didn't agree with the title as he wanted it to be *Mahajeevan*. But Louise had made it clear that such a title would not be acceptable to an American publisher.

The dinner passed off quietly. When Mallika guided Louise to the washroom, she took hold of her hands and said animatedly, 'Don't trust this man.'

Mallika had not expected this kind of behind-the-back comment from Louise.

Mallika stopped her as she was stepping out of the bathroom and asked, 'What do you want to say?'

Louise pushed her away and said, 'I too loved this man once.'

Though greatly disturbed at this, Mallika tried to behave calmly. As they left her house, it was decided that there was no further need for Mallika to meet Louise before her departure. They would leave for the airport in the car provided by Mallika for Som Prakash. Louise hugged Mallika before leaving and patted her cheeks before getting into the car. Mallika did not know what to think of Louise.

Mallika thought about her while lying on her bed. She concluded that the girl had gone crazy because of her preoccupation with research. Otherwise, she would not have talked the way she did. She looked at the flyer sent by the travel agent. It contained the schedule of the visit to Tashkent. Som Prakash had invited her to accompany him there. They were to go to Moscow and Leningrad after the work at Tashkent was over. Mallika had not given her consent yet, but she had gathered information about the proposed tour. Depressed at what Louise had said, she dismissed the visit from her mind and tore up the leaflet.

After Louise's departure, Som Prakash monopolised her time. Mallika accompanied him to meetings where he seemed to take pride in introducing her to others. The work relating

to the trust also progressed on schedule and Mallika's father had already given a handsome cheque for it. She thought of Louise at times and concluded that Americans were a high-strung lot.

Som Prakash patiently heard out Mallika about her relationship with Abhay. She had never confided about it to anyone ever. She felt quite relieved and lightheaded after disclosing everything to a third person. She was grateful that Som Prakash had given her the opportunity of talking to him about such a personal matter. She had also shown Abhay's letters to him at his insistence and Som Prakash had kept them to read them at leisure. When she asked for those letters a few days later, he said, 'I won't give those letters back to you. You will read them again and grieve. The letters would henceforth be the property of the *Mahajeevan* Trust.'

Mallika indeed felt sad whenever she read those letters. When she thought of Abhay, though she did recall the many happy moments they had spent together; yet her mind mainly revolved around unpleasant scenes. She always held Abhay responsible for everything that had gone wrong with her life.

Mallika felt even more at ease with Som Prakash after she had told him everything about Abhay. She began to go to his house at all kinds of odd hours. She would feel no hesitation in sitting on the bed and talking to him as he lay resting on the bed. She answered all his queries about Abhay with a straight face and explained unabashedly all the personal details and hidden messages in Abhay's letters. Mallika did not hold back anything when Som Prakash asked her about their physical relationship. Even when he questioned her on their sexual relations in graphic detail, Mallika did not even blush in narrating everything in intimate detail. Mallika had no hesitation in baring herself completely before Som Prakash.

Mallika analysed her relationship with Som Prakash during the few days he was away at Tashkent. She had no doubt that his brilliant and robust personality had affected her greatly. If his book had enabled her to be born again, he himself had given her a new zeal for life. He had become an

important part of her life. But Mallika was confused at times. While Som Prakash seemed to be a decent man, he at times puzzled her. She felt compelled to go to him, but often returned from him filled with unhappiness and doubts. Yet she wished to go back to him again. Louise's words often rang in her ears to influence her against Som Prakash. Mallika felt that she too had perhaps harboured a sense of envy and intolerance towards Louise at that time. She pondered over the matter for a long time and concluded that she should not attach any importance to Louise's outburst.

Mallika felt a vacuum inside her in the absence of Som Prakash. He had kept her life fulfilled notwithstanding her mixed experiences of him. She hàd expected that he would phone her from abroad, but that didn't happen. Mallika wondered if he was testing her patience! Once she even thought of obtaining his telephone number and talking to him. But later she restrained herself, and began to count the days till his return.

Abhay's letter arrived during this time. The letter was brief. He had written: 'I have thought a great deal about our relationship in the past few days. I think we should sit together and talk about it once again. I am waiting for your answer.' Mallika felt excited on reading the letter. If only she had his old letters with her, she would have read them. She started reading *Mahajeevan* instead and felt as if she was being relieved of all the burdens of life. She could now analyse all her problems objectively. It no longer seemed to be a problem involving her and Abhay; it seemed to involve two unknown lovers, and she was able to see everything from a neutral position. She decided not to answer the letter. She would show it to Som Prakash on his return and seek his advice.

Mallika went to the airport to pick up Som Prakash the day he returned. The plane landed at midnight and Som Prakash looked fatigued after the long flight. It was three in the morning by the time they reached his house. Mallika said, 'Take rest now. I won't disturb you for the next twenty-four hours.'

Som Prakash said, 'I won't be able to sleep now because of jet lag. You don't have to return home so late; stay back for the night. I have many things to discuss with you.'

Mallika looked at her watch and agreed. She made coffee for both of them. As they drank coffee, Mallika said, 'I too have something to tell you. I received a letter from Abhay while you were away.' She took out the letter from her purse and handed it to him.

He kept the letter aside without opening it and said, 'I have thought a great deal about you in the past few days'.

Mallika replied, I know you have spared a great deal of your time for me. hence, I must put forth my dilemma before you.'

Som Prakash said, 'Forget that there was someone called Abhay in your life.'

Mallika looked at him questioningly and said, 'Is that possible?'

Som Prakash said, 'There is no past or present in life; life consists only of a future full of possibilities.'

His words sent a shiver deep down inside her, this was the last sentence of *Mahajeevan*. Mallika sat stupefied. She didn't object when Som Prakash pulled her to him. Kissing her on the lips, he placed his hand on her breasts and said, 'From now on you will only be mine.'

# Responsibility

FIVE DAYS had passed by since Somnath's death and Stuti still lay on the bed staring at the ceiling. She didn't even bother to cast a glance at Manan. She had stopped sobbing and now lay still thinking: What had she done to deserve such injustice!

She was seventeen when she had got married to Somnath. She had passed the matriculation examination a year before from the village school. She came to the town with Somnath immediately after their marriage. This was the first time she was exposed to the life in town; she had never stepped outside the village earlier. She still remembered how she stepped inside the rented house one evening with all their luggage, eight days after their marriage. Initially, she had been bewildered to see the large number of people, shops and vehicles and had felt suffocated in the small two-room house. A street ran just outside the house and there was always a crowd gathered there. There was not even a bit of open space either at the front or the back.

The days after the marriage were fun-filled. In a few days, Somnath acquainted her with the ways of the city. But Stuti was always scared to step out. She shut herself up behind closed doors from 9:30 in the morning when Somnath left for his bank, until his return in the evening. One day Somnath compelled her to accompany him outside. There were small shops on the street corner. Somnath said, 'Come here and buy things if you run out of anything at home.'

Stuti nodded in agreement, but she never set feet on the street on her own as long as she stayed in that house.

Somnath took her to the movies at times. She loved seeing movies, but felt breathless amid the crowd on the street and the jostling inside the hall. She breathed easily again when they returned home.

Somnath loved food and Stuti kept herself busy in cooking and attending to other household chores throughout the day. She read the newspaper from cover to cover in her spare time and sometimes listened to the radio. Somnath was a quiet person and returned home straightaway after office. Apart from the office hours, he spent all his time with Stuti. Stuti prepared snacks and tea if any of Somnath's friends dropped in, but she never came out of the kitchen; Somnath had to carry the plates from the kitchen and serve.

One day a friend of his came to his house along with his wife. Stuti called the wife inside and talked to her, but did not come out even for a moment.

Somnath often said, 'The ways of the city are different. Learn to be a townie.'

Stuti's reply would be, 'I am comfortable with my village.

Somnath would say, 'You will always be a rustic.'

When she carried Manan in her womb, Stuti said, 'Take me to the village.'

Somnath reasoned that there were no good doctors there, and complications are possible in the first pregnancy.

Stuti insisted on going to the village. She said, 'Every girl goes to her parents' to give birth to her child.'

Somnath forced her to visit a lady doctor for a routine examination. Strangely enough, Stuti struck a rapport with the doctor. When she returned from the nursing home, she said, 'It's all right, I won't go to the village. Make all the arrangements with this lady doctor.'

There were no problems during Manan's birth. But Stuti didn't want to stay in the nursing home for longer than a day. She took leave of the doctor and returned home. Her mother and sister-in-law arrived to help her out. But Stuti packed them off very soon and took charge of the household.

Somnath was worried that Stuti had to do so much work in her feeble health. One day he said, 'I will get someone to help in the house.

Stuti replied, 'You don't have to worry about my work. I will do my work, you do yours.'

Even then Somnath did not feel reassured and treated Stuti as if she was so fragile so as to break on touch. He would not go near her at night.

One night Somnath found her awake and restless on the bed and asked her if she was feeling unwell. Stuti said, 'No.'

After five minutes, he found her in the same state and asked, 'What's the matter?'

Stuti said, 'Yes, I'm sick. Please get me the medicine on that shelf.

Somnath opened a packet and found birth control pills inside. When he started laughing loudly, Stuti chided him, 'There's no need to laugh like that.'

Somnath changed houses twice during his stay in that town. The next house was on the first floor of a building. Stuti felt awkward initially in that house. She did not feel comfortable in the locality either. Somnath said, 'You never go out. How does it matter if the locality is good or bad?'

In fact, she rarely went outside. There was no end to her fear of the city - a fear which had taken hold of her since the day of her arrival.

One day someone knocked on the door when Somnath was in the office. Stuti stood near the front door with the baby in her arm, but refused to open the door. Stuti told Somnath about it when he returned in the evening. Somnath replied, 'It must have been the postman. This letter was lying under the door.'

When there was a knock on the front door another day, Stuti assumed that it was the postman and asked him to drop the letter outside. Standing outside, Somnath said, 'It's me.' He had returned early from the office since he felt ill. They had a good laugh over the matter and Somnath often made fun of Stuti reminding her of the incident.

Stuti's fears increased manifold as Manan grew and started walking. She kept the front door locked all the time as she was scared that he would go out and fall down the stairs. She nagged Somnath all the time to shift from the house. Manan was now a year old. He ate everything, but needed a bottle with a nipple to drink milk or water; he was not able to drink from a glass. Somnath always asked her to wean him from it, but Stuti did not bother. She had grown extremely fond of him. Somnath would scold Manan at times when he was obstinate about something, but Stuti would pull him towards her and hug him. One evening Manan's milk bottle fell on the floor and broke.

Somnath said, 'It's all for the good. Don't buy another bottle. Let him learn how to drink from a glass.'

But Stuti said, 'Buy a bottle for him right now. The child might feel thirsty in the night.'

Stuti sent him to buy the bottle at night even though she was scared to stay all by herself. She picked up the sleeping child and went and stood outside to look for Somnath when he did not return even an hour after leaving on his bicycle. She was standing on the road when Somnath returned. He was angry with her. He said, 'How can someone buy a bottle around here at this time of the night? I had to go all the way to the railway station.' Then he added, 'Never come out of the house so late in the night.'

Four years had passed since they had moved to the new house. Stuti now liked the place. After arranging things in the house, she had said, 'We will stay in this house until you are transferred from here. The household goods had increased manifold in the meantime. Lots of things had also been purchased for Manan. He continued to demand a bicycle but Stuti would have none of it. This house was on the ground floor and Stuti thought that the first floor house was better. If Manan were to leave the house, he would straightaway be in the midst of vehicles racing in all directions. Somnath had found this house with a lot of difficulty. He could not have got a better house within the house rent allowance he was eligible

for. The house was a bit far from the office, but he purchased a motorcycle and went to office on that. At times he would plead with Stuti, 'Come let's go for a ride on the motorbike.'

But Stuti was scared stiff and refused. They ordinarily moved around on a rickshaw whenever they went out. Stuti was terribly worried the day Somnath took Manan for a ride on the motorbike.

Somnath started looking for a school for Manan as he grew older. One day he returned from the office and said happily, 'Manan has been admitted to Model School today.'

Stuti asked, 'How far is the school from here? How will the child go all that way?'

Somnath said, 'People spend thousands of rupees to get their children admitted in this school. It is said that parents apply for a seat in this school even before the child is born. The principal of the school had some work in our bank, so Manan was accommodated. Otherwise I am a small person; who would admit our child in that school?'

Stuti felt sad that Manan had to travel such a long distance in the bus to attend school.

Somnath said, 'Your son will study in such a good school, you ought to be happy. Manan's future is assured.'

Initially, Stuti was worried stiff until Manan returned from the school for the day. Gradually, everything fell into a routine. Manan turned out to be good at studies. When he came home with his monthly progress report, Somnath explained to Stuti that Manan had done well in mathematics and that he would be a chartered accountant when he grew up. Stuti felt extremely pleased, but said, 'Who knows what he will do when he grows up.'

Somnath's pay cheque increased substantially in the meantime and they began to lead a comfortable life. He had many friends now. Stuti heard about his friends from Somnath and could recognise a few of them on their visit even if she didn't come out to meet them. Madhav, who stayed in the same building and was the landlord's son, became a close friend of Somnath who invariably spent some time in the

evening with him if there was no work at home. Madhav too came to their house at times. In spite of Somnath's prodding, Stuti never came out to meet him.

One day Madhav came down the stairs as they were waiting for a rickshaw outside. As Madhav greeted Stuti, Somnath said, 'You wanted to see Stuti, you can have a good look now. You may not get another chance,.'

Stuti turned her face away, and as Madhav left, she said, 'How shameless!'

One day Stuti opened the door when there was a knock and found Madhav standing outside. She said, 'My husband is not at home.'

Madhav looked at her and asked smilingly, 'Is Manan at home?'

Manan was standing beside her. Madhav came inside the house on seeing him and talked to him for a while. Somehow, Stuti did not like Madhav's behaviour. When he left, she shouted at Manan and said, 'How can you be so friendly with anyone who drops in?'

When Somnath returned home, Stuti said, 'I don't at all like that friend of yours. Tell him not to come when you are not around.'

Somnath replied, 'You do not know Madhav. He is a decent fellow who always helps other people in need. You always think everyone is out to get you.'

Stuti replied, 'I have no need for decent people who help others in need.'

Someone came in the evening to give news about Somnath's accident. Madhav happened to be standing there at the time. He found a rickshaw and accompanied Stuti to the hospital. Somnath was already dead by that time. His body lay in a corner covered with a sheet. Stuti lost consciousness at the sight. She was not able to recall any incident after that. She had no idea how she returned home, who took care of the funeral, who sent a wire to her brother and who looked after Manan. Women sat all around her bed. Someone forced some food down her throat and led her

by the hand to the bathroom at intervals. Manan sometimes came to her and cried, sitting beside her. Her brother and sister-in-law arrived and took charge of the house.

Stuti didn't cry any longer. She slept, or thought about the developments with her eyes closed or looked vacantly. She had refused to accept Somnath's death initially, but gradually. She accepted it as a reality. She was, however, yet to come to terms with the cruel injustice done to her. Now her thoughts mostly dwelt on Manan. It was going to be a long time before Manan could stand on his feet.

Stuti opened her eyes. She knew that it was around noontime. Her brother and sister-in-law sat near her. Manan had gone off to sleep on her lap. When she opened her eyes, her brother asked, 'Would you like something to eat? '

Stuti didn't remember when she had last eaten something. She thought for a while and said, 'No, I'm not hungry.'

Her brother said, 'Get up from the bed in that case. Wash up at least.'

Her sister-in-law held her by the hand and led her to the bathroom. She washed herself and came and sat on a chair. Her brother said, 'Your neighbours are very nice people. They have taken great care of you before we came. Somnath's colleagues in the bank were also extremely helpful.'

Stuti asked, 'Is it Sunday today?'

Her brother replied, 'No, it's Tuesday. Today is the fifth day.'

'Why hasn't Manan gone to school?'

'Let him stay home for a few days.'

'No, why should he stop classes?'

Her sister-in-law handed her a cup of tea. As she finished the tea, her brother said, 'I had applied for seven days' leave. I have to return in three days time. Come with us if you can, or else, your sister-in-law will stay back here for a few more days.'

Stuti asked, 'Where can I go when Manan has to go to the school here?'

Her brother said, 'You have to change Manan's school anyway. How can you stay alone in the town?'

'No, Manan will study in this school. Manan's father used to say that this is one of the best schools. I will stay here.'

Without arguing over the matter, her brother said, 'The insurance company will pay fifty thousand rupees. The bank will also pay something towards his arrears and gratuity. Your signature is needed on all these papers. I will explain everything after lunch.'

Stuti replied, 'No, I'm not hungry. Explain everything now.'

Her brother showed her a paper and asked her to sign on it. Something was written in English on the paper. Stuti read the name of the insurance company and asked, 'What paper is this?'

'This is the discharge note. They will send the cheque when you sign on this.'

'What shall I do with the cheque?'

'An account has to be opened in your name in the bank and then the cheque would be deposited. Somnath's friend will come in the evening and make the arrangements.'

'I've heard that the bank pays interest when you keep money with them. How much interest will I get on this?'

'Not much. It won't even take care of your house rent. Besides, who knows whether the landlord will accommodate you now that Somnath is gone.'

Stuti woke Manan from sleep. He was happy that his mother had recovered and was talking. Stuti asked him to call the old landlord from upstairs.

Madhav arrived with Manan. Before he could enter the room, Stuti told him, 'I shall stay in this house until Manan completes his studies. The usual rent will be paid. Do you have any problem?'

Madhav felt embarrassed at this straightforward question. He said, 'Consider this your own house. Stay here as long as you wish. Why do you worry about such things at this time?'

Stuti said, 'It's not a question of just now. I have to think of the future too. I am asking because of that.'

'Somnath was my close friend. You won't have any problem here. You can always tell me if you are inconvenienced in any way', Madhav assured her and left.

Her sister-in-law said, 'We thought you may come to the village after the work here is over or come and stay with us.'

Stuti replied, 'You know about the village school. I have passed matriculation, but I'm not able to read or understand English. What would Manan do studying in that school? His present school is one of the best. That leaves me with the problem of finding enough money to get by. I can sell my ornaments and deposit the money in the bank. That will earn me some interest.'

So saying, she took out all her ornaments from a box, and said, 'Brother, let's go and sell these ornaments.'

Her brother replied, 'What's the hurry? You can wait for a few more days?'

'No, you would be gone in three days. I can't manage this on my own.'

'In that case, how will you manage alone in this town?'

'I won't have any problem. But, I have never handled money and ornaments before. Hence, I'm asking for your help.'

Her sister-in-law fed her forcibly. But Stuti insisted on going to the goldsmith after eating. Both brother and sister-in-law accompanied her to the goldsmith. When Stuti handed over all her ornaments to the goldsmith, the sister-in-law suggested, 'You should have kept some; it would have come handy in a crisis.'

Stuti smiled. She said, 'What other crisis could come my way? Let the money be spent on Manan's studies.'

When the goldsmith was weighing the ornaments, Stuti thought of something and kept back a thin necklace. The goldsmith computed the value and asked, 'Shall I give cash or cheque?'

Before the brother could say anything, Stuti said, 'Cheque. I shall also deposit this in the bank. I can get interest on it.'

As they returned from the shop, she told Manan, 'You will go to the school again from tomorrow. Concentrate on your studies.'

Two of Somnath's friends from the bank arrived that evening. They had come to give the dues in a cheque from the bank. One of them suggested, 'Open an account in your name in our bank.

After Stuti had signed on the form, he said, 'You don't have to go to the bank, we'll open the account in your name and deliver the cheque book.'

Stuti asked, 'No, I'll go to the bank myself.'

They kept quiet on seeing the determined look on her face.

Stuti asked, 'A loan had been taken for the motorcycle. What will happen to that?'

The balance of the loan amount has been written off by the bank. The motorcycle now belongs to you. If you have no other plans, an employee of the bank will buy it from you.'

'How much will he pay'? Stuti asked.

On hearing the amount, Stuti said, 'I'll tell you tomorrow. Where is the motorcycle now?'

'It has been given to a garage for repairs. One of us will bring it here once it is repaired.'

They took leave after promising to come and take her the next day to the bank to open an account. After they had left, Stuti asked her brother, 'The motorcycle had been purchased two and a half years back. Is the price right?'

Brother said, 'It all depends on the present condition of the motorcycle. But it seems to be a fair bargain.'

Stuti said, 'Okay.'

After dinner that night Stuti sat near her brother and estimated what she was worth. She added up all the amounts on a piece of paper and asked him how much she would get as interest if she were to deposit everything in the bank.

She became sad on hearing the amount. How was she going to manage in the town with such a pittance? Her brother noticed her expression and as he was about to say something, Stuti said, 'You think I'll change my mind in a month or two, no? I'll stay here until Manan completes his studies.' After a while, she added, 'The house rent is taking

away a major chunk of the income. What do I need such a big house for? One room will do for the two of us.'

Brother said, 'Somnath had some land in the village. A telegram was sent to his brother, but he didn't come.'

Stuti said, 'He remains sick. He might not have been able to come due to that reason. The other brother works in the army, and no one knows his whereabouts. He never writes to anyone nor does he reply to the letters. I'll go to his village and find out about the property when Manan has holidays. Some money will come my way if that is sold.'

Stuti went to her brother the next morning after waking up. He was still asleep. She woke him up and said, 'I'm not able to trace my matriculation certificate. May be I had left it at home when I came here, or maybe it is lost. Please get a duplicate certificate from my school and send it to me.' Stuti again searched for the certificate in the house but could not find it.

After reaching the bank, Somnath's friend said, 'Please wait here. I'll open an account in your name and deposit the cheque.'

But Stuti said, 'No, I'll do everything myself. Please tell me what to write on this form and where to deposit the cheque.'

She studiously familiarised herself with the rules of the bank. As they were about to leave the bank after finishing the work, Stuti said, 'It's the twenty-ninth of the month. I'll need money for the coming month. Please tell me how to withdraw money.'

Paying no heed to the pleadings of the man, she stood in the queue and withdrew the money herself.

As they returned home, her brother tried to reason with her, 'How can you stay alone in the town? Do we have any friends here? Apart from that, the people of the town cannot be trusted.'

Stuti replied, 'Please don't ask me to leave this town until Manan completes his studies. So many people manage to live in the town. There are nice and helpful people here too.'

After a while, she added, 'The only problem is money. I have to cut down on my expenditure. First, I've to move to a smaller house.'

Brother asked, 'Somnath's friend had given the address of the garage. Shall we go there?'

Stuti replied, 'No, Manan will be coming back from school. Apart from that, what do I know about motorcycles? Let that fellow from the bank buy it. See if you can get something more from him.'

Stuti went to the landlord after feeding Manan. He was a very nice man. He said, 'Please don't worry about the house now. We'll talk about it later.'

Stuti said,' I'll leave this house. I would like a smaller house on rent if you have one.'

The gentleman replied, we'll discuss that after a few days.'

Stuti said, 'No, tell me today.'

He told her about a small house on the same street that was lying vacant.

Stuti said, 'Kindly arrange that house for me. I'll vacate your house on the first of the month.'

She returned home and started packing. Brother said, 'Let me apply for leave for a couple of more days if you are going to move to another house.' Stuti said, 'What more can you do in a day or two? I've to look after myself now for the rest of my life. I'll manage things; you'll see.'

Madhav came to her house in the evening after college. He asked, 'What is the need to leave this house?'

Stuti asked him to sit down and made tea for him. She said, 'You know everything about my husband. I've to manage now on the interest I get on the insurance money. That apart, what do I need such a big house for?'

Madhav said, 'It is all right. If you've already taken a decision in the matter, I'll arrange that small house for you. The house is nearby. You won't have any problems there. I know the landlord of the house. I'll see that you get the house at the minimum rent possible.'

Madhav remained quiet after saying this. He got up to leave when Stuti didn't say anything else. Then he said, 'You know that Somnath was my close friend. Please let me know if you have any problems. Don't consider me a stranger.'

Stuti changed her house while her brother and sister-in-law were still there. In spite of all kinds of persuasions, she insisted on her sister-in-law returning with her brother. Manan was at school when they left. She left them outside and locked the door on getting inside. Then she felt totally alone. No one else was with her. There were no memories of Somnath either in the new house. She started crying. Gradually, she broke into a racking sob. No matter how she tried, she could not control her grief. She lay down on the bed and cried even more loudly.

Someone knocked the door at two in the afternoon. Stuti got up from the bed. She stopped crying and opened the door after washing her face. She forced a smile on her face and asked Manan, 'Did your classes go alright today?'

Manan didn't say anything; but at lunch he said, 'I am not able to handle mathematics.'

Stuti became angry with him. When she found that Manan had stopped eating, she said, 'It's all right. You eat first. You were good in mathematics earlier. How will you do well in your examination and become a chartered accountant if you are not good at mathematics?'

Manan said, 'Half the students have done badly in mathematics.'

Stuti said, 'How does it mater to us if half the students are doing badly? The other half are doing well!'

Manan said, 'They all have tutors at home.'

Stuti didn't say anything else. But when Madhav came to the house that evening, she talked to him about the problem after offering him tea. Madhav said, 'Why do you get worried over such a silly mater? Manan, get your mathematics book. I'll explain everything to you.'

Manan came with his book and notebook. Madhav tried his best to explain things to Manan, but did not succeed.

Finally, he told Stuti, 'To be frank, I'm not so good in mathematics myself.' The three of them burst into laughter on hearing that. Madhav said, 'Don't worry. Tomorrow, 'I'll ask one of my students who is good at mathematics to help. He'll come and teach Manan for an hour an two.' He turned to Manan, 'Tell me if you need any help with English.'

Manan said, 'I've secured eighty-five per cent in English this time. I know everything in English.'

Gradually, Stuti got into the habit of going out on her own. She went to the bank herself the day she received the cheque from the insurance company and deposited it in her account. To avoid visiting the bank again to draw money for the expenses of the coming month, she withdrew money from her account too and bought groceries on her way back. She would have to pay the rickshaw fare twice had she not done this.

Stuti was very careful about money. She didn't spend even a dime extra unless it was absolutely essential. She did all the shopping herself. The day she discovered that a shopkeeper had cheated her on weight, she went back to the shop with Manan, reprimanded the shopkeeper and returned with the goods weighed correctly.

She had no problem in running her household. She could manage if she was careful or if no big, unforeseen expenditure came up all of a sudden. But she was a bit scared to stay alone in a house with no man around.

A man from Somnath's bank came for a few days to explain about the dues from the bank. The man came once or twice to enquire after her well-being even after that matter was settled. One day he arrived in the evening when Manan was not at home. He sat down and said, 'I'll come at intervals to ensure that you are not inconvenienced in any way.'

Stuti didn't say anything.

He continued, 'I've come from such a great distance, won't you even offer me a cup of tea?'

Stuti didn't like the man. She gave him a cup of tea alright; but she went indoors after placing the cup before

him. The man drank the tea and stood up after waiting for some time. Stuti came and told him, 'I've no problems. There is no need for you to come again to this place.'

But at times Madhav came. He got along well with Manan. Stuti too talked to him about various things. She sought his help when there were minor problems. His student taught mathematics to Manan and Madhav himself helped him with English. Madhav would get storybooks for Stuti from his college library. Stuti felt happy when Madhav came and the three of them talked at length. If Manan had homework to do, Stuti would tell him to go inside and study.

Stuti went to the bank to meet the manager the day she received her matriculation certificate from her brother. He was busy in some meeting and she was asked to wait. It was also time for Manan to return from school. So she didn't wait any longer and returned home. The manager asked about her welfare when she met him the next day. When he heard that she was only a matriculate, he said, 'It's difficult to give a job with that qualification. I could find you a good job if you knew typing. Would you like to do some menial work?'

Stuti could not come to a decision immediately; she remained quiet.

The manager said, 'Think it over. I'll make some arrangement whenever you want it.'

Stuti went straight to the female stenographer after emerging from the manager's cabin. The girl offered her a seat when she introduced herself. Stuti asked her where she could learn typing. The girl wrote down the address of an institute located near her house. Stuti asked her how long it would take for her to learn typing. She though about the whole thing on her way back. She could only manage to get a menial job in her present state. But she could get a regular job if she spent six months in learning to type. What was six months after all? It would take many years for Manan to become something in life. It would help Manan in future if she managed to get a good job.

She made enquiries about learning to type, but the problem was the timings. The typing class got over at four in the afternoon, but Manan returned home at two. How would he manage on his own after returning from school? Stuti thought. She asked Manan, 'Can you serve yourself and take lunch if I cook and leave the food for you?'

Manan said, 'Yes'

Stuti bought a lock with duplicate keys and taught Manan how to open the lock and get inside. Manan had already finished his lunch the first day Stuti returned from her typing class. He had even washed his plates. Stuti wanted to cry but wiped the tears away on looking at Manan and gave him a hug.

Stuti applied herself seriously to the job of learning typing. She sat with Manan in the evenings to do her homework. Manan smiled on seeing her mother study seriously. Manan his told her, 'You always insisted that I should be first in the class; you too have to stand first.'

Like Manan, she wrote down anything she did not understand. She would remove her doubts when Madhav would drop in. She had already found out how much salary she would earn after learning typing. She would feel extremely happy on adding up all her potential earnings at intervals. She thought she could set aside a substantial part of her salary for Manan's future studies.

One day she received a letter from her brother all of a sudden. He had written, 'There is an assistant engineer here, his wife died last year. He doesn't have any children. Of course, he is a bit advanced in years, but I could talk to him if you are agreeable ...'

Her brother was indeed a weird person, Stuti thought. She wrote back, 'You know about my responsibilities. I hope to get a job in the bank in a few days. Hence, don't worry about me any further. Don't talk to anyone. I am all right by myself.'

Manan was playing outside. As he came in, Stuti said, 'Take this letter and drop it in the post box.'

As he took the letter, Manan said, 'I had forgotten to tell you, Madhav Babu had come when you had gone shopping yesterday. He wanted to talk to you.'

Stuti said, 'Drop the letter and go to his house and tell him to come in the evening.'

Manan said, 'Let me wear my shirt in that case.'

Stuti looked at him lovingly as Manan changed his shirt. He was only seven. How long would it take for his thin, emaciated child to grow up into a man? Stuti was just twenty-four. When would this responsibility of hers come to an end?

After Manan left, Stuti opened her suitcase and took out a sari she fancied. She had a wash and wore the sari carefully. She sat before the mirror and used a bit of make-up. She applied a *bindi* to her forehead and wore the necklace that she had kept aside. Then she looked at herself carefully in the mirror. Not only for Manan, she was also responsible for herself. After all, she had some responsibility towards her own body and age as well!

# The Lineage

MOHAN DAS was a contented man by nature and accepted whatever destiny dealt him. He had even accepted without protest the appointment of younger leaders as cabinet ministers while he was made only a deputy minister. His allegiance towards the chief minister did not waver despite this. So he was not surprised when the chief minister himself called him a few days later and offered him a cabinet post. He believed that things happened as ordained; there was no need to lose one's sleep over that. Everyone praised him for his patience, forbearance and equanimity.

At times when he was all by himself, Mohan Das would think of his past life. He would push back all unpleasant memories and tried to recall only the happy times. He thought of his fun-filled childhood, the days in the school and in college, his irresponsible youth, the cat and mouse games of politics and his own gradual advancement thorough party-hopping, the affluence and fame that followed, and his family comprising his wife and an only child to whom he was not particularly close. His son's poor academic performance, irresponsibility and criminal tendency would have disturbed another person, but Mohan Das knew that these would not create any problems, for in due time, he would be able to change the image of his son and prop him up as his political heir. He had absolute faith in himself in this regard.

In his own case, Mohan Das had seen how the image of a person could easily be improved. His own surname stood testimony to that. One's name always has a special significance in public life and especially in a political career.

Someone had said that it would not have been so easy for Hitler to become a dictator if his name had been long, complex and a tongue-twister like Shicklgruber! People had accepted him as they could easily call him Heil Hitler; they would not have done so with a tongue-twisting name.

Within a few days of entering public life, Mohan Das knew that his surname was a handicap as it clearly indicated that he was from a low caste. High-caste people looked down upon him even though he was able to garner the support of his community because of his surname. Thus, Mohan Das removed his surname through an affidavit and added the extremely common and nondescript Das to his first name. He also took the decision that, in due course, he would change his son's name through an affidavit. He had also settled on a few names for the purpose, for instance, Azad Bharat!

The present and the future could be altered through such manipulations, but the problem was with the past. How could one play tricks with the past? This was the cause of his misery. One could go to the court and change his own name as well as his son's. But what about the name of one's father? His father did not have any control over his name; he had to live with the name given by his father. The name got distorted further in the mouths of the village folk. His name might have been Buddhanath perhaps, but everyone in the village addressed his father as Buddhia Bhai or Buddhia Uncle; he even had the same name on all documents pertaining to his landed property. Whenever Mohan Das had to write his father's name anywhere, he wrote it with a great deal of shame.

Mohan Das had an even greater misgiving when it came to his father. He had not seen his father for a few years during his childhood. He felt deprived when his friends in the school and village talked about their fathers. He had been told at home that his father stayed at his father-in-law's house and looked after the farming. When he told this to his friends, they told him that his father had gone to the uncle's house and not to his father-in-law. He was not able to understand the significance of these words in his childhood.

Even though no one told him clearly about it, he came to know when he grew up that his father had been in jail in connection with some litigation involving his landed property, and 'uncle's house' referred to the jail!

Mohan Das's political colleagues often talked about their ancestors as proof of their patriotism and sacrifice. Who had gone to jail from which family during the Quit India Movement was regarded as the acid test. It was known that the father or uncle or father-in-law of most of the political leaders had been imprisoned in that period. If the mother or aunt of someone had been jailed, he was held in even higher esteem. No one even distantly related to Mohan Das, nor even anyone from Mohan Das's village, had ever played any active role in politics, not to speak of going to jail. The Congress movement seemed to have spread everywhere except for his village, and Mohan Das suffered from an inferiority complex in this regard. As he rose higher on the political ladder, his father continued to live in the ancient, dark and poverty-ridden *mofussil* village left ignored by the Congress. Mohan Das would perhaps have been happy if he could have severed all relationships with the family and the village that had given him so many complexes, but it was not possible since it was also his constituency. Finally, his father died and Mohan Das was rid of the baggage.

Mohan Das had to go to the jail during the Emergency as, by a stroke of luck, he happened to be in the opposition at the time. Despite the temporary discomfort, he was glad that no one would be able to question his patriotism and sacrifice any more. He came out of the jail in quick time after tendering an apology and shifting his political allegiance. He narrated his experiences in jail to anyone who was willing to listen; he tried to prove that he had made up for the deficiency of none of his ancestors having ever gone to jail. But this claim was not very productive as the leaders of the ruling party and the opposition buried their hatchets because of frequent and repeated change of parties, and the honours of the people who had been jailed during the Emergency and those who

had put them there became even. On the other hand, inspired by the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, leaders would proudly acclaim their many generations which had served the nation. Since Mohan Das had no pretensions in this regard, he confined himself to fantasising whether he could not change the history of his forefathers through an affidavit.

This was obviously ridiculous, but Mohan Das was not aware of Pandit Gadadhar at the time. Gadadhar taught at an unheard-of college, but that was not his complete identity. His research papers spoke for him. He had two objectives: first, to establish that the architecture in Orissa was more ancient than it actually was, and second, to prove that most of the famous people of the country either had their roots in Orissa or had spent a substantial part of their life in Orissa. Needless to say, Gadadhar was extremely popular, and no one raised any objection when he assumed the title of Pandit, although non-Brahmins, as a rule, could not be addressed as pandits. He was now engaged in an important research work. After establishing the fact a long time back that the famous poet Jayadev was an Oriya, he was now on his way to prove that the poet's birthplace was not located on the banks of the river Prachi as was generally believed but in the village of Kandabali, situated near Gadadhar's own village. Two things had to be done to prove this: install an ancient image of Radha in the dilapidated temple at that place and carve the words 'Jay Jay Dev Hare' on a slab placed in the sanctum sanctorum. Pandit Gadadhar had been busy in this endeavour since quite some time.

Gadadhar's service period came to an end at this time. Gadadhar had made a name for himself during his long career as a researcher, but he had not been able to make a dime out of it. Publishers would not publish his books, so he had to publish them by spending his own money. Besides, he also had to spend money in preparing historical documents, excavation works, etc. He had established a research centre a long time ago for the purpose and sought donations from the public towards funding his activities; but

the money that he finally collected was not enough to meet even the printing expenses of the letter he had prepared to seek donations. His disgust at the ungrateful Oriya race made him close down the centre. He decided to enlist the support of the Culture Department to ensure two square meals a day. Deliberating a great deal over it and carrying everything he needed for the purpose, Pandit Gadadhar started out for Bhubaneswar for a ten-day stay.

Gadadhar stayed for the night with a friend at Bhubaneswar and made a set of all the books he had published. He went to sleep only after writing fawning dedications to the Minister of Culture in exquisite handwriting on the front page of each book. The next morning he started out to meet the minister with the set of books. He could finally reach the minister's P.A. after toiling hard for the day and managed to hand over the set to him. But the P.A. gave him no assurance about fixing a meeting with the minister.

Gadadhar made another set of the books that evening, wrote dedications for the P.A. on the front pages and reached his house the next morning with the books. The P.A. opened the books and was happy to read the dedications where accolades were heaped on him in the pandit's own handwriting. He offered him tea. As he sipped tea, Gadadhar talked about his research, ignoring the P.A.'s young daughter busy tearing the pages of his books into shreds. But the P.A. was least interested in Orissan architecture or in the illustrious sons of Orissa, and so Gadadhar stopped midway and said, 'You must tell all this to the minister.'

The P.A. said, 'the minister is new to the Department; I don't know if he would understand all this.'

He gave Gadadhar an appointment time to meet the minister the next day and as Gadadhar was about to leave, he said, 'The peon took away the books that you had brought yesterday; bring a new set for the minister tomorrow.'

That night Gadadhar got busy in writing dedications on a new set of books in even more obsequious language. When

he reached the office of the minister in the morning, he had to accept that the P.A. was indeed a capable man for he took him inside the minister's chamber right away. Gadadhar had prepared himself throughout the night for this meeting, but he was disappointed when he entered the chamber. The minister was not alone and the room was full with people, some were standing since there were not enough chairs. They all seemed to be politicians engrossed in discussing some complex problem of the party.

Mohan Das looked at Gadadhar after a while and motioning him to come near, asked, 'Where's your application?'

Gadadhar handed over the set of books and thinking that he might not get another opportunity, he blurted out, 'I want to write your biography.'

Concentrating on the conversation with his party men, Mohan Das said, 'That's all right; but where is your application? Get an application tomorrow and I will mark it to the secretary.' After that, he reverted back to the discussion with partymen.

On coming outside, Gadadhar had to contend with the outbursts of the P.A. He admonished, 'You put me in an embarrassing position.' Then he gave a bit of advice: 'Remember one thing for all time. Always carry an application with you when you go to meet important people. Who can remember what someone says when there is so much work to do?'

The P.A. then made him sit in his room and gave him tea and said, 'All your labour was in vain. Those books of yours were also wasted. Of course, you reached at the wrong time. The minister was in the Lift Irrigation Department earlier, he is unhappy at being shunted to the Culture Department. But I can introduce you to the secretary of the Culture Department if you are interested.'

On returning home that day, Gadadhar concluded that he had to adopt some other tactics. He met many of his acquaintances the next day and collected information about

the minister, the secretary and the Culture Department. The P.A. was right; the minister indeed was unhappy. The secretary too was in a none too happy state as he had been recently transferred from the Animal Husbandry Department to his current place by way of punishment. Gadadhar realised that the department authorities would not be able to help him attain his objectives; he would only end up giving away all his books.

He had to seek the help of some political friend of the minister for this purpose. He made enquiries and concluded that Rahash was the man for the job.

Everyone knew the Rahash was the right-hand man of the minister and it was he who collected money and acted as the go-between when there was work with the minister. His prime job was to arrange goondas who kept a leash on dissidents in the meetings addressed by Mohan Das. Gadadhar found someone who was close to him and reached his place with a set of books on which dedications were inscribed in sycophantic language. Gadadhar handed over the packet of books to the mustachioed man in dark goggles sitting on a chair on the verandah and waited to see his reaction. Rahash opened the packet and was obviously surprised to find books inside, as he was used to finding bundles of hundred rupee notes or country revolvers in such packets. Still he was happy to be holding so many books at a time in his hands and enjoyed the thought that someone at least considered him to be literate. Even if he did not understand all the words of the dedications, he could figure out that they were words of praise meant for him, and so he motioned to Gadadhar to take a seat. He said, 'Tell me how I can help you.'

Gadadhar realised that the man knew his job and was straightforward; hence, he said, 'Help me meet the minister alone for ten minutes.'

Rahash might have asked for details from someone else, but he knew that there was no money to come from this schoolmaster. Hence, without any further ado, he asked him

to come at a specified time the next day.

Instead of writing dedications on the front pages of his books, Gadadhar got busy in preparing a write-up that night. What he wrote after a great deal of thought and taking cognizance of all the angles seemed too long to him. Ministers did not have the patience to read long write-ups. Hence, it had to be shortened. His host appeared some time during the night finding the light on, and instead of reminding him of his electricity bill, he said 'You should not be working so late at this age. You'll fall sick. Go and sleep.'

Gadadhar ignored him and worked for one more hour to shorten the write-up. He made a fair copy and then went to sleep.

By the grace of Rahash, Gadadhar got the chance to meet the minister alone. The ten minutes had to be utilised fully. Hence, he handed over the write-up to the minister and said, 'Sir, I'll speak only when you have read this.'

Mohan Das was irritated, but he put on his glasses and started reading. He had to humour the man since he had come with Rahash. The write-up was strange indeed!

*Morning Shows the Day*

This boy spent his time with books when other children of his age wasted their time in playing. His father decided to show him the city of Cuttack observing his keen interest in studies. He asked him to sit near the temple of Chandi with a book in hand, but when he returned after five minutes, the boy was missing from the place.

The boy had finished reading the book, and finding a stray horse grazing by the roadside, he mounted it. He had never sat on a horse earlier, but there was no fear in him. He refused to alight when the owner asked him to get down. A very old, bearded man came out of a nearby building on hearing the sounds of a scuffle. He too tried to persuade the boy to get down failing which, he tried to pull him down. But the boy pushed him away instead of obeying him. The old man told him in

Bengali, 'No one has dared fight with me in this manner till today.' He went inside the house and the boy got down on his own after a while.

Lifting his eyes from the piece of paper, the minister looked at Gadadhar questioningly for he could not understand what it meant and why it had been given to him. Gadadhar said, 'There are two more lines on the next page, please read them.'

All school children in Orissa sing: 'I'll study, I'll ride a horse to the fort; I'll give Madhu Babu a pasting in court.' However, this has been true in the life of only one boy – Mohan Das.

The minister was still confused. He asked, 'Is this about Gandhiji?'

Gadadhar replied, 'Why should this relate to Gandhiji? It is about you. I said I will write your biography; the book will begin with the narration of this incident.'

Everything became clear to Mohan Das instantly. He had never even imagined that his biography could be written so elegantly. He asked, 'How could you know about this incident?'

Gadadhar answered, 'I had found out your date of birth. Madhu Babu breathed his last during your childhood. The rest of the information was a product of intensive research.'

'What else have you found out through your research?' Mohan Das asked. His curiosity knew no bounds on hearing this interesting fact about his own childhood.

Gadadhar was prepared for the question. He said, 'It is extremely significant how you came to be known as Mohan Das.'

Gaddhar knew that he had the minister in his grips now. Hence, he kept quiet for a few moments to build up an atmosphere and hoped that the minister would order tea. The minister did ring the bell for the peon and ordered tea and informed the P.A. over the intercom that he was not to be disturbed for the next half hour.

Gadadhar now reclined in his chair a bit further, looked disdainfully at the P.A. when he came inside with some papers, and pulling out a book from his bag, he wrote a dedication and handed it over to the minister. The minister ran his eyes on the book and kept it aside, and looked at Gadadhar expectantly so that he would resume from where he had left off. Instead of obliging the minister, Gadadhar opened his book at a particular page and handing it over to him, said, 'Sir, please read this first; you will get to know everything.'

The page contained Gadadhar's CV. He had written the page after a great deal of thought and labour so that anyone reading it would know that Gadadhar was not only a writer and poet of eminence but also an orator, social reformer and researcher par excellence. Mohan Das had no choice but to read it and when he found Gadadhar still talking in circles, he said, 'You were talking about my childhood.'

Gadadhar was now convinced that the minister had swallowed the bait, and he took his own time in sipping tea in the process increasing the minister's agony. He then said, 'Gandhiji had come to Orissa in December 1927. Miraben, Kakasaheb Kalekkar and Mahadev Desai had accompanied him. Gandhiji held meetings at many places, such as Berhampur, Chatrapur, Aska, Rasulkonda, Belguntha, Purushottampur, Kodala, Khallikote, Rambha, Banpur, Bolgarh...'

Mohan Das could not take it any longer. He interrupted, 'What has all this to do with my name?'

Gadadhar ignored him and continued, 'Khurda, Jatni, Sakhigopal, Puri, Jaleswar, Balasore, Baliapal, Charbatia and finally, he reached Cuttack. Your parents had reached Cuttack two days before and had been waiting to meet Gandhiji. As your mother lay prostrate before Gandhiji, he picked her up and placing his hand over her head, said, "You'll get everything you want if you wear khadi." Your father already wore khadi as a Congress worker; your mother too started wearing khadi from that day onwards. You were born ten months after this incident.'

Gadadhar fell quiet after saying this. Eeven a not-so-intelligent man like Mohan Das was able to understand now why he had been named so and didn't ask any further question. Pandit Gadadhar was indeed a learned man. Mohan Das opened the book again to read about Gadadhar's literary career before remarking, 'No. you won't write my biography.'

Gadadhar was confused; perhaps he had gone wrong somewhere. Be that as it may, the minister relieved him of tension and said, 'You'll first write the biography of my father.'

Gadadhar heaved a sigh of relief and knew that this was the right time to put forth his problem. He said, 'I would have started work on this tomorrow itself. But I have retired this month and I still have many family obligations. Once I am through with these, I'll meet you again and start my research work.'

Mohan Das had thought of a lot of things in the meantime. One of his major, long-standing problems was going to be solved soon. He had to grab the opportunity at any cost. Pandit Gadadhar was a clever man. He had been able to link his family with Gandhiji and Madhu Babu in no time at all. Many more gems were likely to come out from his research and that would surely help advance his political career. He said, 'Talk to my P.A. about your problems. I'll make some arrangement for you here so you can carry on your research without a hitch.'

The P.A. led Gadadhar to his chamber and ordered tea. He said, 'Sir, did you notice how I arranged your exclusive meeting with the minister? Tell me what else I can do for you.'

Gadadhar seemed not to have heard him and said, 'My host in the city is going away for a few days. I need another place to stay.'

The P.A. immediately telephoned various places and made arrangements for Gadadhar's stay in a guesthouse for seven days. Gadadhar then said, 'I need a job where my emoluments

should be at least what I was getting at the time of my retirement.'

The P.A. noted it down. A car was then arranged to take Gadadhar from his friend's house to the guest house. As he left, he said, 'We'll discuss the money needed for research after I get settled. And, please tell the minister that everything has to be put in place in a day or two.'

When Gadadhar met the minister again after two days, he received an appointment letter as advisor to the Department of Culture without even making an application for the job. Gadadhar made calculations and found that the salary fixed for him was more than what he was getting at the time of retirement. Happy, he said to the minister, 'Sir, I'll get busy with your work now; I'll write such a biography of your father that anyone reading it will be totally awestruck. But I'll keep bothering you at intervals for this work. I may have to do a bit of travelling or pay some out-of-pocket expenses at times. Of course, that'll come later.'

Mohan Das said, 'Don't worry about such things; everythig will be taken care of. I think I'll ask Raju to help you out. He'll provide all the information about my household and help you in your research work.' He called Rajendra, his son, and introduced him to Gadadhar. Gadadhar was scared to see the young man who looked like a hooligan. He was even more apprehensive when he surmised that the minister had perhaps engaged the young man deliberately to keep an eye on him.

In a few days, Gadadhar left his old place and moved to the capital. A government quarter was also made available to him by the grace of the minister. But there was a problem with regard to the research work. The minister wanted him to immediately collect some new information about his father and tell him about it. He was often summoned by the minister for this reason and Gadadhar had to be constantly engaged in his research work. Quite often, the research work produced through sustained effort had to be abandoned. Like the time he described how the minister's mother had gone inside the

Jagannath temple along with Kasturba during Gandhiji's 1938 visit to Puri and how she had apologised to Gandhiji later on. Gadadhar had thought that the minister would be happy to hear that, but he became unusually grave all of a sudden. He was not permitted to enter the temple as he belonged to a low caste. He wanted to go inside the Puri temple but had never attempted to do so for fear that the priests might kick up a row. If such an incident were incorporated in the book, the priests might raise their voices against him. But, instead of saying all that, Mohan Das simply said, 'No, I remember clearly that no such incident had occurred at the time.'

Gadadhar might have talked about his research, but he felt quiet on seeing his sombre face.

A different kind of problem arose with Rajendra. One day, Gadadhar told him by way of conversation that he was collecting information about his grandfather's imprisonment at the time of the Quit India Movement. He had to examine court documents relating to this. Of course, if the papers were lost or otherwise misplaced, he would have to produce them from his imagination. Rajendra promised to show him the relevant papers but within a few days of this conversation, the record room of the courthouse caught fire and all the old documents got destroyed. After that, Gadadhar became careful about what he discussed with Rajendra.

Once Gadadhar went to Mohan Das's village in connection with his research work. He found the villagers whole-heartedly supporting all the facts he had gathered about the patriotism of Mohan Das's father. He met the oldest man of the village to record his statement and was happy that the old man readily agreed with everything. When he talked about the freedom struggle, the old man told him that Mohan Das's father was at the forefront of all Congress-related work. When he asked the old man to sign on the paper after recording his statement, the old man handed him a piece of paper instead and said, 'I have a work pending at Bhubaneswar for the last three years. You get it done and I will sign your paper.' The villagers also put forth many other conditions,

such as upgrading the village school to a college. These experiences were not too pleasant for Gadadhar.

The six months' time allotted to Gadadhar in the first instance was about to get over. The tenure of the assembly was also coming to an end and there was no certainty about the future of Mohan Das. Gadadhar knew that his usefulness would cease once he completed writing the biography and that the minister would not have any faith on him if he did not produce something in writing. He gave it some thought and came up with something new. He met the minister and presented him a new plan - organising the hundredth birth anniversary of Buddhadev. Mohan Das was not able to understand its significance immediately. Gadadhar had changed his father's name since long without the help of an affidavit, but Mohan Das did not remember it all the time. He was pleased to hear the proposal. The election lay ahead; this kind of a show was surely to be beneficial. But some more plans had to be drawn up with an eye on the forthcoming election, like establishing a village development trust in the name of the revolutionary Buddhadev. But he had to seek the help of other people regarding this, not Gadadhar.

The minister remained busy as the election drew near and Gadadhar realised that the sooner he could extract an order regarding his job, the better it would be. He thought over the matter and met the minister again. Mohan Das seemed worried that day as a political problem had developed. He met Gadadhar nonetheless and informed him that he had sent a note to the Secretary to extend his service for another six months.

Gadadhar said, 'It's immaterial whether I have a job or not; I'll positively complete writing the history of your family since I've assumed the responsibility for it.' Showing a bunch of papers to the minister, he added, 'I've already completed writing your father's biography. I think I should be starting on yours now.'

Mohan Das was preoccupied with other thoughts. He was thinking how life would indeed be wonderful if one didn't have to do so much labour and if one could go through life only with the help of affidavits and historians! Mohan Das remained silent. Gadadhar said, 'I've been thinking of telling you something since long. Think over the matter. Change your son's name to Rajiv.'

Mohan Das asked, 'Why?'

Gadadhar replied, 'There are many political leaders who are engaged in service to the nation for generation. But how many people are there in this country in whose family three generations of people are named after three great souls of India?

There was a fleeting smile on Mohan Das's sad face. He asked the P.A. to connect him to the Secretary of the Culture Department and ordered tea. When the Secretary came on the line, he said, 'I had asked you to extend the service of Pandit Gadadhar for six months; no, not six months, extend it for one full year.'

# The Balance

THERE ARE some people in this world who, on reaching a crossroad in their lives, take the decision that their one objective in life has to be achieved at any cost. Everything else turns insignificant and irrelevant after that and they devote the rest of their life, resources and efforts in attaining it. Rick Goodman was one such person whose life's calling now was to study the temple architecture of Orissa. Rick had no idea what or where Orissa was until he was forty. He worked as a structural engineer in a company in America; he had no fascination or interest in the arts. He decided to study business management while he was on the job and took admission in a university after getting leave. He opted for history of architecture as a subsidiary subject in which the professor was an expert on Orissan architecture. Inspired by her, Rick decided suddenly one day that his life's objective was to do research on the temple architecture of Orissa.

Once he had taken the decision, he didn't allow any languor in his efforts. When he had first visited this precious land ten years ago, he had fallen in love with Orissa, or to be more precise, with the temples of Orissa. He was able to stay only for a few days at that time, but he came to accept Orissa as his second home at first sight.

He had spent a lot of time in Orissa in the last decade. He spent a whole year in Puri and when he came for the second time he learnt the Oriya language. He was not only introduced to a new language at that time but became familiar with a new land and its sand and dust, summer and rains, men and women, and rituals and traditions. He lived in a

small, dirty house, had difficulties with food and travel, fell sick quite often, and the people around him didn't consider him to be one of their own despite his best efforts. But Rick was content with the progress he made in learning the Oriya language and making a detailed study of the nearby temples.

While he spent more time with the stones in his subsequent visits, he also became familiar with many of the local people. He was able to speak and understand Oriya and made a few friends. Of course, the people who knew him had concluded that he was stark, raving mad. This idea of the people suited Rick as it gave him the freedom to do anything he liked under the cover of his so-called madness.

Every time he came to Orissa, Rick met the Pandit of Puri who was an expert at faking old palm-leaf manuscripts. The Pandit took him under his fold during his first visit and dangled a carrot before him saying that he would enable him to buy an as yet unpublished manuscript on architecture. He prepared the first page of the fake manuscript and showed it to him. Rick was gratified to read the preface to the yet unwritten book of Shilpachandra Chudamani. Of course, Rick learnt more about this gentleman who was an expert at faking old, historical documents and realised the Pandit produce that the manuscript on architecture page by page before his very eyes. Instead of hindering him in his creative work, he kept on encouraging him. One of the reasons for this was that, along with the main book on his original research, he had also planned to write a small book on 'Forgery in Architectural Treatises of Orissa.'

Even if more and more papers and photographs were being stuffed into Rick's suitcase every time he returned from Orissa to America, he was still not sure how he was going to use all the information. Numerous books had already been written on the temple architecture of Orissa and Rick was not keen to write yet another book on the subject which would contain nothing new. He arranged his papers systematically, read his notes many times over and examined the photographs painstakingly while in America. Yet he was unable to decide

from which angle and viewpoint he would write his book. He found the solution to this complex problem providentially during his latest visit to Orissa. He had gone to the village of the stone masons and received the news that all the masons had gone away to a far-off place to build a temple. This was like God's gift to Rick. He decided that his book would be on the life and tradition of the stone masons of Orissa and the new temple would be the centre of his research work. After deciding this, he went directly to the place where the temple was being built.

Shikullia was not much different from any other medium sized village of Orissa. The zamindar's house was the most prominent object in the village which was surrounded by paddy fields, bushes and mango groves. Even though the zamindari system was no longer in practice, the patriarch was addressed as the zamindar and the huge, crumbling house was known as the palace. Unfortunately, all the children of the old man were dead and there was no one left to carry on the family name. In spite of his advanced age, he was still in good health and had a sharp mind. He had decided to sell all his property and build a temple. He had huge wealth, and using that, he wanted to build a temple in accordance with the Orissan architecture as a memorial to his dynasty.

The Pandit of Puri had also reached the village and by the time Rick reached there he had appointed himself the advisor of the zamindar with regard to the construction of the temple. The open field on the outskirts of the village was the chosen location for the temple and a few masons sat there. On seeing Rick the Pandit dragged him away and making him sit under a dense banyan tree he showed him two more pages of the manuscript. The leaves looked extremely ancient and classical. But Rick already knew the process of making palm leaves look ancient by hanging them over a kiln, dipping in mango juice and burying in the ground for a given period of time. Still he examined the two leaves eagerly, appreciated the expertise of the pandit silently and asked when the entire manuscript would be available.

Assuring him that he would give the manuscript very soon, the pandit said that the zamindar fully depended on him to maintain the classical purity of the temple. The pandit had been given the responsibility of determining what pujas had to be performed, deciding the exact location of the temple and specifying the rituals to be followed to decide the specified directions and those to be followed for the initial digging after the bhoomipuja. Hence, he was in a position to help Rick substantially in his research work. Rick was aware that the pandit would prepare the manuscript based on the traditional knowledge of the masons to build the temple and finally sell it to him. But he kept quiet about it, and with the minor research project in mind he encouraged the pandit to buy the manuscript for him.

The computations of the Pandit revealed that the auspicious day for commencing work on the temple would arrive in six months time. Hence, Rick decided to go back to America before returning for a long stay at the place. He started making arrangements for his stay at the place on his return after six months. This was almost impossible as there was no practice of letting out houses on rent in the village. Rick succeeded in getting a two-room house on the outskirts of the village with a great deal of difficulty. He took the house on rent immediately and got busy in making it habitable. He built a temporary bathroom adjacent to the house, redesigned the walls to fit in windows and generally decided where his furniture would be placed.

Rick did not forget to continue with his research work while doing these mundane tasks. He listened to the conversation of the masons very attentively and took down notes. When the zamindar, the masons and the pandit got together for a discussion, Rick found the experience particularly rewarding. It struck Rick that an essay titled 'Indian Art and its Patronage' could be written on the basis of the discussions. With their permission, he started recording everything on a tape recorder and though everyone's way of talking changed significantly after the arrival of this machine - they all now

seemed not to be talking to each other but to the machine – Rick found it to be yet another successful step towards the completion of his research.

Whenever he thought about his research, he was convinced that he had been born only to take charge of this important assignment. He had studied engineering so that it would help him to study temple architecture. His studies, company job, marriage, divorce, study at an advanced age and contact with the arts professor – everything seemed to have been ordained. He reflected on this, sitting before the pandit and examining the just-produced palm leaf. Showing the page dealing with the foundation of a temple, the pandit explained to Rick how the temple would be built without using lime cement or nails, and with only stones balanced on each other. Carrying the discussion further, the pandit tried to establish how the Indian society had also been formed on the basis of a balance among interdependent force. But Rick didn't listen to him. He was thinking of how he would study the stages of progress in the construction of the temple through his engineering skills and produce a classic book that would prove his hypothesis. When he returned to America again, his suitcase contained not only papers, photographs and tapes, but also fanciful ideas and a great belief in himself to successfully execute a huge plan.

When Rick after settling his affairs in America returned to Orissa after six months, the first news about the temple disheartened him. The construction of the temple had been postponed indefinitely as the pandit had left for America to inaugurate a temple there. Of course, Rick knew from his experiences in India that time and timeliness were ephemeral and meaningless here; hence, forgetting his disappointment, he started living in the house he had taken on rent, even if he had no idea when the construction of the temple would be resumed. Amid such uncertainties, he decided that he would use all the time at his disposal in doing his research even though the task might be theoretical and not applicable in nature.

But the work was not so easy. To take photographs of temples in villages while living in a city was one thing but living permanently in a village was quite another. However, though he had many problems in the village, there was an advantage in staying there. Earlier when he came to the village, the village children would constantly surround him and run after him until he left the village. The grown-ups would harangue him by asking about his caste, creed, family, work, etc. He was never able to work peacefully. Now that he was actually living in the village, the children thronged the place for a few days, but soon lost interest when they discovered that he was going to live there for a considerable period. He could work in peace after that.

He concentrated on setting up the house in the first few days. Having come to India a number of times, he had learnt how to live in a simple and unencumbered manner. He engaged a boy called Raju to do the odd jobs. The boy was extremely stupid and Rick knew that he would have been better off had he engaged the boy called Bhabagrahi, but he had finally engaged Raju as it was easier to pronounce his name. In a few days, he arranged the furniture, made minimum provisions for cooking, locked his equipment and papers in cupboards and settled down to work. His only job now was to go to the zamindar and his people to find out when the pandit was likely to return and when the construction would begin. It was not easy to find the correct information as the answers varied from the coming Friday to the next winter. However, Rick didn't lose heart and paid a monthly salary to the chief mason to sit with him and discuss the nitty-gritty of temple architecture.

The way of life in the village was not in the least suited to Rick's work. He sat with papers, pen and taperecorder from eight in the morning waiting for the chief mason to arrive, but the fellow appeared only at noontime. Rick let his irritation show when one day the mason arrived twenty four hours late. The mason was not perturbed in the least and said, 'I thought we had a date on Monday.'

At times, a whole day passed in attending to his work at the post office and the bank; sometimes there were no stamps in the post office and sometimes there was no money in the bank near the village. Another major problem was that he had to accept the hospitality of the people wherever he went since he was an attraction in himself and it was of no consequence whether his work got done or not; he had to describe the history of his personal life in detail, sitting among strangers drinking cup after cup of the entirely undrinkable tea prepared especially for the sahib with too much milk and sugar.

The discussion with the chief mason progressed steadily, but he had no idea of the possibility of the construction of the temple and the duration this might take. Still he didn't feel too bad about leading a sedate life in the village. Being an amicable person, he had become friends with the villagers. At times, he thought that he would forget all about the temple and write a geological book on the village; but then he would reproach himself and desist from thinking such things and the objective and philosophy of his life. The villagers considered him to be one of their invaluable properties and were happy to present him before others. If they had to meet the B.D.O. or the tehsilder in connection with some problem in the village, they took him along with them and Rick put their grievances before the officers as their spokesperson. It was an enjoyable experience for the villagers to find the officers experiencing difficulty in understanding Rick's English.

It was a new and interesting experience for Rick to relate to people after maintaining a relationship with only stones for so many years. Gradually, he became a small part of the village instead of being something spectacular. All Indians looked alike to him when he had come initially to India; gradually, he was able to discern personal traits of the people. Similarly, while he had thought that all the villagers had the same nature, Rick was now discovering that each individual had separate identities, joys and sorrows, qualities and shortcomings, and natures and characters.

If he had thought that he would assimilate himself with the life in the village, it was simply not feasible. He learnt to speak decent Oriya and was able to judge the people correctly, and he really loved them. He thought that he was not able to be close to the people only because of his colour. He found that he could be really close to them if he took part in their social life and problems. Rick wrote a long letter to the District Collector on the various needs of the villagers on which no action was being taken by the block and tehsil office, such as, the digging of a pond on the outskirts of the village and the waiving of land cess because of the drought situation of the previous year, and sent copies of the letter to the B.D.O. and the tehsildar. The villagers praised him for his efforts and Rick was happy that they trusted him now.

But its consequence was unpleasant for Rick. His letter would have been lost amid the heaps of letters in the office had it not been for the electronic typewriting on imported paper. The officer's face turned crimson on reading the letter; the B.D.O. and the tehsildar went together to the officer-in-charge of the police station even though they didn't get on well with each other and neither of them had any love lost for the police officer. A few days later, a constable arrived from the police station, demanding in a rough voice to see Rick's passport and asked a lot of offending questions about his visa. The constable held out a few threats even when everything was in order. Rick regretted that the villagers stood quietly around him and no one intervened when he was being bullied thus by the constable. Of course, shouting at the top of their voices, they reassured Rick and extended their support to him and denounced the police atrocities once the constable left the place.

Another incident distressed him, though he was not particularly annoyed by it. Rick taught Raju how to read time on a watch and counselled him about punctuality since he had no sense of time; he even presented him a watch. The watch was a beautiful object – it sang at the stroke of every hour and it was a magic toy for all the villagers. Raju

reported for work at the appointed time after getting the watch and Rick was pleased that he had succeeded in making at least one person punctual. He also decided to present a watch to the chief mason although what he really needed was a calendar.

But Raju himself came to him one day and returned the watch. When he asked him about it, he discovered that the watch had landed him in trouble. When Raju roamed around in the village wearing the watch on his wrist and amazing everyone by its music, his friends made fun of him rather than enjoying it. It was obviously out of jealousy. Raju also had an altercation with his elder brother at home when he asked him for the watch so he could wear it to visit the nearby town with his friends. When Raju refused, his brother scolded and threatened him and told him that he could not be held responsible if the watch was stolen. Hence, Raju didn't leave the watch out of his sight so much so that he took it with him even when he went to the river bank in the morning. He did not take it off even when he slept; still he woke up several times in the night for fear that his brother would steal the watch. The more he clung to the watch, the more he was made fun of both at home and outside. Not being able to bear it any more, he returned the watch to Rick.

The next problem for Rick was the chief mason. Rick was paying him well and he was happy with it for the first two months. But the next month he asked for more money on the plea that his wife was sick. Rick refused to pay him more and so he didn't turn up the next day. He came after two days and said that he was too sick. Rick noticed that the mason didn't cooperate willingly with him thereafter and the discussions were not exactly fruitful. As he thought of increasing his salary, the elder brother of the mason arrived one morning and said that, if the sahib were to appoint him, he would not only explain the fundamentals of temple architecture but also allow him to make a photocopy of the ancient manuscript lying in their house. Rick told him that he needed time to think it over.

The elder mason left after advising him to keep the matter absolutely confidential and promising to come after two days. Before Rick could take any decision on the matter he received an anonymous letter that the elder mason had no right over the manuscript in their house. This put Rick in a quandary and he decided to no longer discuss the matter with the elder mason.

An old woman of the village came to him one day and begged for food while he was busy working with the mason. Many such poor people came to him at intervals to beg for money under different pretexts. Initially, he helped them on listening to their tales of woes; but the number of needy people increased on learning that there were easy pickings to be had. Finally, Rick decided not to help anyone anymore. But the old woman was different. She was the poorest person in the village; she didn't have anyone to fend for her and she lived on alms. Rick decided that he would make some permanent arrangement for the old woman rather than giving her alms once to twice. He spent a large amount of money and bought two milch cows for her so that she could lead a comfortable life. The result was that the poorest person of the village became affluent all of a sudden and even engaged a servant to look after the cows. Rick was happy that the old woman lived comfortably; but she became an eyesore for the entire village.

Rick was unhappy that his research work had gone haywire and often thought of moving around as before to collect information about temples instead of staying in one place. But his discussions with the mason were not yet over. He took Raju with him at times and photographed a few small temples and village deities in the surrounding areas. One day when he was about to button the camera case after taking photographs, he discovered that the lens cap was missing. He started looking for it and everyone around him also got busy in the search even though they had no idea what a lens cap was and how it looked. The cap was not found ultimately and Rick returned from the place consoling

himself that he could use the lens cap of the other camera for the one lost.

But the matter was not over yet. Police arrived at his house a few days later to investigate the theft of the lens cap. Someone had informed the police station after hearing about it from Raju. Rick tried to explain that nothing had been stolen, and what had been lost was not important. He showed the other lens cap to the police, but the police was determined to catch the thief. In spite of all the pleadings of Rick and the villagers, the police arrested Raju and took him away. His body was swollen up all over when Raju returned to the village after two days. He looked like a long-suffering patient with a frightened look in his eyes. Rick reassured him in all possible ways, but he was no longer willing to work for him.

Lalbehari or Lala was appointed the replacement for Raju. He had studied till the tenth class and was now doing nothing after being retrenched from the peon's job he had done for a while. Lala was extremely hardworking, faithful and clever. Rick heaved a sigh of relief after letting him run his household. But the next problem arose because of Lala. When the youth of the village came to him and asked for a donation, Rick gave them a large donation on Lala's recommendation. Rick had no idea that there were two youth organisations in the village and Lala supported one of the two. The breach between the two gangs increased with regard to the matter of the donation. That the youth organisation supported by Lala could steal the limelight at the festival time with a white man in the forefront rankled the other group no end. But Rick was not aware of these developments as Lala carefully managed to keep this a secret.

Rick was astonished when the B.D.O. arrived one day with the papers relating to the digging of the pond. After satiating all his curiosities about America, the B.D.O. informed Rick that the pond would indeed be dug in that village soon. Rick discovered that the pond had not been dug so far as the nearby villagers also demanded the same thing. But Rick was unable to fathom how the problem got solved so quickly

when the issue could not be decided for such a long time. Still he was happy with news. But when the tehsildar showed his letter of recommendation to the higher authorities to waive the land cess the same afternoon, Rick had a nagging suspicion that something was amiss.

He had an inkling about bureaucracy in India and his doubts were rested when the B.D.O and the tehsildar jointly erected an archway at the entrance to the village and the streets were decorated from the archway till his house. He realised that some high-ranking officer was coming to meet him. The officer-in-charge of the police station arrived soon, saluted him smartly and informed him that the Collector would come to meet him.

The B.D.O., the tehsildar and the police officer took over his house the next morning and with Lala's active support, placed tables and chairs and got busy in preparing food. Rick wanted no part in the proceedings. He didn't appreciate that someone should arrive at his own convenience in this manner without as much as informing him, but it was not possible to do anything about it. Hence, he kept quiet and concentrated on revising and refining his knowledge on Indian hospitality and bureaucracy in a philosophical manner. When the Collector arrived with his courtiers in the evening, he was given a royal treatment. Once the people were through with their complaints and the passions waned, he bade farewell to others and sat down alone with Rick for a tete-a-tete.

The Collector was a young man fresh from college and had been appointed in the district four month earlier. The district was far removed from civilisation and extremely underdeveloped. The daily necessities were not available in its headquarters. Hence, anyone posted to the district, considered it to be a punishment. The young Collector was unhappy at the situation and concentrated on writing poetry while attending to the tedious work of the office. Now he desired to study more. Even though unsure of what he was going to study, he had come to Rick to find out whether he could get a scholarship to America for higher education.

Rick saw him off that day after explaining about American universities and their fellowships to the best of his ability. Subsequently, Rick's fame soared not only in that village but in all the surrounding villages. The tehsildar sent him cakes on festive occasions and the B.D.O. invited him to join him when he started out for the town in his jeep. The officer-in-charge of the police station enquired if he had any problem with his visa. The other youth organisation of the village which had ignored him until then also extended its hand of friendship towards him. A few young men sought his help to get them peons' jobs. The sudden fame of Rick also spread to nearby villages and he was involved in solving the problems of those places too.

Rick might have enjoyed all this had his research progressed on schedule. Even though the zamindar didn't say anything overtly, he gave the impression that he was no longer interested in the construction of the temple. There was no news about the pandit from America; someone had given unsubstantiated news that he had grown a beard and was busy collecting disciples in Europe, after his visit to America. The chief mason had put him in all kinds of difficulties. The B.D.O., the tehsildar and the police officer came to him whenever they chose and wasted his time over problems relating to their jobs. While plagued by such mental agony, he suffered from malaria. Lala was his only consolation now and he looked after him with all sincerity.

Rick decided to return to America after a great deal of thought and come back again after doing proper homework. He got busy in preparing to leave. He had to tie up many loose ends. He made arrangements to ensure that Lala would be able to take care of himself after his departure. He talked to Lala about it and it was decided that Lala would open a tea shop and Rick would give him the money for the purpose.

Rick felt sad at the time of leaving the village. He had come to love the villagers in the past few months. He went to the houses of the people he knew to bid farewell; he

invited the B.D.O., the tehsildar and the police officer to tea and one morning he left the village along with Lala. Rick had tears in his eyes when Lala waved him goodbye at Bhubaneswar airport.

Rick took quite some time to recover his health and put things in order after reaching America. He wrote letters to all his acquaintances in the village as also a long letter to Lala, enquiring about his welfare. He recalled the village at intervals when he perused his research papers. He had kept photographs of many people from the village; looking at those, he remembered Raju, the secretary of the youth organisation, the old schoolmaster, the zamindar, the B.D.O., the tehsildar, etc. and hoped that they would reply to his letters. He waited expectantly, but no one replied including Lala. He received just one letter from the Collector after a long time. The Collector had thanked him after getting the brochures of different universities and informed that he had been transferred to a good post which he would join soon. Hence, he had banished the thought of higher studies for the time being. He had also written in a postscript that he had stopped writing poetry.

When his student Sharon sought his advice before going to Orissa for research, Rick told her everything about the village and requested her to visit the place. He asked her to find out about Lala in particular. Rick received a long letter from Sharon after about four months of her departure from America. Sharon had visited the village and tried to meet all Rick's acquaintances. As per her letter, the old zamindar was embroiled in an income-tax case and no longer thought of constructing the temple. The old woman had been reduced to a sorry state and often starved as someone had poisoned her cows. The family of the mason was engaged in litigation due to internal strife. The pandit had returned with two overseas disciples and was engaged in building an ashram near the seashore. The B.D.O. had been suspended from service on charges of corruption relating to the digging of the pond. But Lala had flourished

as his teashop was making a large profit; however, after striking it rich, he had abandoned his wife and child and now lived with a young girl in another house near his shop. Sharon had not been able to meet only one person from Rick's list; Raju had been jailed on charges of theft when Sharon had visited the village.

# Eyes

IT HAS been many years since it happened. Those days I used to stay in Puri for days at a stretch in connection with my research work on *pata* paintings. At first, I used to stay in some small hotel in the town. Once I met an old friend Robin while wandering along the seashore. His family had a house at Puri which had been lying vacant for a long time. He told me that I could stay there when I came to Puri. I took on his offer and stayed in that house whenever I went to Puri after that.

The house was in an extremely dilapidated state. The furniture was in a state of decay since it had not been used and cared for a long time. Robin himself lived in Bhubaneswar and had one day come to my hotel in Puri. He took me in his car to show me the house. We first located the gardener who looked after the small garden outside the house. It was already evening by the time Robin collected the key from him and opened the door and we stepped inside. When Robin switched the light on, I had a sudden feeling that I could not stay in that house. The light was extremely dim perhaps due to low voltage and the interior looked very drab and uninviting. When I looked at the dark room adjacent to the drawing room, a cold wave of fear ran through me for some reason. I thought I would tell Robin right away that I didn't want to stay in that house. It would be simpler to stay in a hotel.

But the light brightened up all of a sudden as the voltage improved and the room seemed to be suddenly filled with a strange warmth of intimacy. Robin showed me around the

house. The rooms were furnished, but everything seemed to be in disarray as Robin rarely used the house. The kitchen and the bathroom were even worse. We came to the drawing room after doing a round of the house. A staircase ran up from that room. Robin said that there were two rooms upstairs used for storing old furniture. He himself had not gone upstairs for a long time.

The gardener brought two cups of tea for us from the roadside stall. As I sipped tea, I looked at the dark rooms around us and the staircase running up. I wondered if I should take up the offer to stay there. Of course, I would be able to stay as long as I wished and move around freely if I had this house to myself. It would also be easier to meet people here. There were restaurants nearby where I could eat. The important thing was that it was for free. Another attraction of the place was that the sea was just behind the house and I could walk to the shore any time I wanted. The only negative aspect was that the house had the eeriness of a haunted place. The old houses along the Puri beach were famous as dwelling places of ghosts and it seemed to me that this house was an ideal address for their permanent residence. While thinking of all this, I felt as if someone stood behind me saying, 'Stay here.' Before I could even think about it, I blurted out, 'It's all right; give me the key to the house. I'll stay here whenever I come to Puri.'

The gardener came and picked up the glasses and said, 'Let's get out quickly. There'll be load-shedding for an hour now.'

We stood up. The gardener switched off the lights. Robin came out and locked the front door and handed over the key to me. The electricity went off no sooner had we come out and got into the car.

It was decided that I would carry my bags from the hotel and move into the house the next morning. The gardener would come and show me around the house. As we sat in the car, I turned around and looked at the house. In the dull moonlight it looked like a perfect abode for ghosts. It seemed like the face

of a huge demon with the lights reflecting from the two glass windows making for its two well-balanced eyes.

I began to stay in that house whenever I came to Puri. The gardener in the meantime had cleaned the house and made it habitable. I purchased an electric kettle to make tea in the kitchen, but mostly ate in the nearby restaurants. When I stayed in Puri, I would leave in the morning to the lane where the pata artists lived to have a chat with them, and then visit the temple to collect information from various temple functionaries and go through the papers of the *muktimandap* pandits. I moved around in a rickshaw, but there was a problem with my camera. Since cameras were forbidden inside the temple, I had to leave it with someone outside. It was also a problem when I sometimes forgot to take off my leather belt before leaving home as that too was banned inside the temple. Therefore, I took a rickshaw on hire for the entire morning hours. Dhadia would come with his rickshaw early in the morning and take me to the restaurant where I had my breakfast on the way to work. I left my camera and belt with him when I went inside the temple and returned home in his rickshaw after having lunch somewhere.

I stayed in Puri at different times of the year, and found the afternoons, or for that matter, any time of any season, a good time to take a nap. Life moved at a very slow pace in this place. If someone fixed a meeting with me in the morning, he would turn up in the evening. The *parichha* would come out of his house after an hour of my arrival when I went to him to examine some old papers. After seeing me, he would disappear for another hour before emerging with the papers. No one was prepared to do any work on most days under the excuse that it was a Thursday or *ekadasi* or whatever. Everything proceeded at an even slower pace inside the temple in the afternoons. Both the pilgrims as also the priests seemed disinterested in everything as if a strange ennui possessed everyone, including the gods in the sanctum sanctorum. Since no one was available for my work quite often, I would sit and rest on the step besides the *muktimandap*. When the inner

door of the temple opened, my newly befriended priest made me circumambulate the *ratna-simhasan,* seat of the gods. In this manner, I earned a lot of religious merit, whether I did any fruitful research or not.

Usually, I dismissed Dhadia after lunch and took a nap. The weather would be a bit pleasant when I woke up so that I could leave for the beach. The hours that I spent on the beach were the most pleasant and memorable ones during my stay at Puri. I also visited the beach on most mornings. There was a strange elation in walking on the sand bare feet. A shiver runs down the body and mind even today as I recall standing on the beach and looking at the mass of water becoming one with the horizon; listening to the roar of the agitated waves and the vibrant casurina trees; and the ecstasy of the touch of the restless salty breeze on my lips.

I met Banambar Maharana of the *chitrakar* street in the evenings when I took a stroll on the beach. He wandered there with pata paintings and masks in a bag in search of customers. At times he spread his towel on the sand and arranged the pictures and masks on it. A few tourists would gather around. When he had sold a few pictures and the crowd thinned, he would pick up his pictures and masks and move around on the beach. I joined him at such time in my own interest. As a sincere researcher I tried to talk to him and extract information for my work. Bana was a simple, affable young man and we soon struck up a friendship. When darkness fell, I returned to the dimly-lit house which appeared quite heartless. I emerged soon after having a bath and went looking for some place to get some decent food. On many days, I went straight to the railway hotel to spend time in the bar.

There would be problems when I returned home after dinner. The road was almost deserted by that time. Very few people or rickshaws used that road. Almost nothing was visible as the streetlights were either out of order or burnt so dimly that one had to walk cautiously. At times I missed and kept on walking even after crossing my house and had to

walk back to it. Of course, looking back, I realised that it was due to my fear of returning to the house!

In the dim streetlight, I would enter the compound after opening the gate and then unlock the front door. The switchboard was on the left inside the room. When the drawing room was lit, my eyes would move straight to the staircase on the right which ran up to become one with the mysterious darkness above. Then I would switch on the light in the bedroom. I would come back again to switch off the light in the drawing room. Each of these ordinary chores was like a well-planned move for me.

I arranged the papers on the table and sat down to write up my day's materials. This was the most pleasant time of the day for me. I wrote letters after closing the notebook, pleased at having done my work for the day. Writing letters had turned into an addiction for me as it helped me re-establish my relationship with friends with whom I had lost touch for a long time. Of course, there was a telephone in the house but most of the time it didn't work. Sitting at the table, I often wished my letter-writing would never come to an end.

The real tough job was to switch off the lamp on the table and go to the bed two steps away. Before that I would move my eyes around once to ensure that all the doors were firmly bolted. But nothing could be compared with the fear welling up inside me once the light was switched off. Someone seemed to hit my chest with a sledgehammer after I covered myself with a sheet and went to sleep. The wailing sea and the crying casurina trees pierced me even though I kept the windows firmly shut. On some days, the weird music of pattering drizzle intermingled with these other fear-evoking sounds.

I must now brace myself to say what I have been avoiding to say until now.

Even though I was neither afraid of nor believed in gods, goddesses, ghosts or ghouls, I feared fear itself. An unseen fear took hold of me when darkness fell and even though I knew that there was no one else inside the closed room besides me, still I could not prevent the quickening of my heartbeats. This

fear was repeated each night. To avoid the moments of fear, I would return home as late as possible and take a few drinks to bolster my courage. I tried to reason with myself, even though there was no such need to explain it to my rational mind, that all my apprehensions were baseless. But fear seemed to lie in wait for me impatiently on the other side of the door and would take hold of me once I stepped inside.

The house had now turned into a veritable challenge for me. I could have left the house if I wished. Or I could have asked the gardener to come and sleep in the house at night. Or I could have had a bedside lamp switched on throughout the night. But that would have meant conceding defeat. I wanted to deny the existence of the non-existent spectre and live naturally at the place.

One afternoon I talked to Bana Maharana about my fear while taking a walk with him on the beach. Bana stopped in his tracks when he heard me, recited something after closing his eyes and spat on his chest to exorcise evil spirits. He said, 'I had been thinking of telling you about it when I learnt that you were staying in that house. A white officer had committed suicide in that house. At times I go to some houses to sell pictures, but I never go anywhere near that one.'

I had also heard about the gora sahib. But similar stories were told about a number of houses in Puri. In fact, some English magistrate of Puri had slit his throat with his shaving razor a hundred years back and this incident spawned numerous legends about haunted houses. I was about to tell this to Bana when he said, 'Let's go and have a look at your house.'

I was never afraid of the house during daytime. But for some reason I found the atmosphere scary as I entered inside after Bana's story even though he was with me. I opened all the doors and windows and the house was well lighted. Bana went round all the rooms and sitting down on the drawing-room floor opened his bag. He took out a set of three masks of the Puri trinity and gave it to me, saying, 'Hang these on the wall and the house will be rid of all evil

spirits. You only have to make obeisance to this image before you go to sleep.'

I had already bought many paintings from Bana and thought this was only a ploy on his part to sell me a few more. He seemed to read my mind when I hesitated and said, 'There is no need for three masks; one will do.'

He took out a mask of Subhadra from his bag, and said, 'Just as Goddess Subhadra stands guard over the Jagannath temple, so would she guard your house.' He hung the mask on the wall near my study table, stepped back and paid his respects to the mask. He added, 'You have nothing to fear now.'

I offered him money for the mask, but he didn't accept it.

My house now thus had a charm to keep ghosts at bay. Even though I never worshipped any god or goddess, I dutifully folded my hands before the mask before going to bed. However, I didn't seem to find any relief from fear. From the time I entered the house and till the time I dropped off to sleep, it was a torture for me every night as before. This was a veritable test by fire for my logical, scientific mind and my self-confidence, and I came out a loser every time. One afternoon I took a step on the drawing-room staircase to go up just to prove that I was not scared of anything, but I heard what sounded like footsteps upstairs and I retraced my steps, conceding defeat to the ghost.

Datta Mohapatra, a temple functionary, gave me another charm for my protection within a few days of hanging the Subhadra mask on the wall. It was a band of thick yellow threads taken off the image of Lord Jagannath. This man applied colours on the icons. He had become quite friendly with me. Giving me the holy band to show his affection for me, he said, 'This band does not ordinarily go to anyone except the temple servitors. No harm will come anywhere near you if you keep this with you. Alright, now donate something for this charm.'

I paid him some money and hung the band over the Subhadra mask.

I had a rather long stay at Puri this time, but my research work was still unfinished. I decided to leave and return again about a month before the Car Festival and stay till the festival was over. And I vowed to finish my work during the period. In due time I came from Delhi and entered that haunted house again in the sweltering summer. My old routine of my fear-stricken days started again. But I was immersed in my work during the period, busy in collecting the rest of the information and tying up loose ends. I had made up my mind to go back finally once the Car Festival was over. I knew that there was no end to research but I had to put a stop to it at some point in time, accepting that enough was enough.

Bana came to me one day with a bearded man dressed in bright red clothes who looked like a tantric. Bana introduced him to me; he was indeed a tantric from northern India. In spite of all my remonstrations that I had nothing to do with occult and that I intended to leave the house soon, Bana and the trantric sat down on the floor of the drawing room and started a puja. Bana assured me repeatedly that I didn't have to pay any money for this. The tantric took out a variety of coloured stuff from his bag, arranged it on the floor and recited a lot of mumbo-jumbo. When they took leave after an hour, in exchange for the money I paid to the tantric, Bana gave me a firm assurance that ghosts had been totally exorcised from the house. He also gave me a packet of magic potion which he promised would make me intrepid. However, it turned out to be nothing but turmeric powder.

While packing my things along with my papers and photographs before leaving Puri, I wondered if I should carry the mask of Subhadra with me. Finally, I decided to leave it behind to keep guard at the haunted house. I threw the packet of turmeric powder given by the tantric through the window. But I could not muster the courage to go upstairs to look around although I had vowed to do it at least once

before leaving. I consoled myself that I could not have possibly proved the existence or otherwise of ghosts by looking at the broken furniture there.

I left Puri by train one rainy morning. The only thought on my mind now was to write the book. On reaching Delhi, I wrote letters of thanks to everyone including my friend of the haunted house. I tried to erase everything from my memory: the unpleasant days and terrible nights spent in Puri in that house in particular, the unbearable humidity, the foul language used by folks on the streets, the vermillion-smeared sacred threads of Brahmins, the red loin cloth of the priests and the sticks wielded by them, their filarial legs and enlarged testicles, idle games of cards on high verandahs in the bylanes, bhang and hashish, the Ananda Bazar of sweets and mahaprasad, the smell of fish and rotten weeds intermingled with the blue mass of water on the seashore, the wailing of the casurina trees, mists of salty water brushing the lips and the steady sea breeze nudging the body and caressing the mind.

Looking at the mass of books, volumes of xeroxed papers and notebooks, stacks of index cards and heaps of photographs gathered on my study table, shelves and the floor of my house in Delhi, I was worried how I was going to write the book. But, in due course of time, my thoughts got organised, the text was completed, and the footnotes, bibliography and index were duly completed. The photographs were numbered serially and put together. I also found a good publisher, and handing over the manuscript to him, I heaved a sigh of relief that I was now free from this insufferable work.

But, perhaps, it was not ordained that I should rest easy for I received a telephone call from the editor of the publishing house. She wanted to discuss the manuscript with me. When I met her, I saw that the typesetting of the book had been started and Susan was sitting with the proofs in hand. This English woman had the reputation of being a competent editor and when I talked to her, I realised that she had gone through the manuscript with a toothcomb. She was knowledgeable

about every small detail in the book. She gave me the corrected proofs in which I found comments and question marks at various places. I brought it home, and finding the comments to be absolutely justified, made the necessary changes and was grateful to Susan for the improvements.

When I met her with the revised proofs, she handed me another piece of paper. It was my original manuscript in which the following portion had been marked: Indradyumna said, 'You just mentioned that after the Snana Festival, Jagannath is placed in a room surrounded by a bamboo screen for 15 days, but you did not say, oh God of gods, how the rituals are to be performed when the Lord cannot be seen.' Brahma replied, 'Listen, Oh wise king! At the end of the Snana Festival, the bamboo screen has to be covered with fine cloth and three pata paintings being the symbol of Balabhadra, Subhadra and Jagannath have to be placed before it for worship.'

When I looked at her after reading these lines, she remarked, 'You have written on the next page that a procession with priests and musicians goes to the house of the *chitrakar* and the paintings of the gods are taken to the temple from there. I should think this is an extremely important part of the book since you say that these painted pictures are the substitute gods to be worshipped for fifteen days. I have seen your photographs, but there is no photograph of these paintings being carried to the temple in a procession. This photograph has to be there in the book.'

She was absolutely right, but I had erased everything about the book from my system. I replied, 'This is impossible.'

But the lady had read the manuscript minutely. She said, 'The Car Festival will be held again very shortly. You can easily go to Puri for a couple of days and take that photograph.'

Looking at my crestfallen face, she added, 'I hope you won't disappoint me.'

It was thus that I had to go to Puri again. I didn't have any other work on hand this time, and I decided that I

would laze around for a few days before completing my short assignment. I stayed at Bhubaneshwar and decided to go to Puri on the evening when the paintings of the gods would be carried to the temple. I planned to return to Bhubaneswar the next morning after taking the photographs at night. I had no desire to stay at Puri any longer than was necessary. I had also decided that I would not bother my friend but spend the night in some hotel rather than in that haunted house.

I remained busy with other work at Bhubaneswar. I telephoned Robin the day I was to leave for Puri and borrowed his car and the key to the house. I had changed my mind and thought that there was no point in taking a hotel room when I didn't have to stay there as I would be out photographing. I only had my camera with me on this trip and I was feeling lighthearted. On reaching Puri, I went to the *chitrakar* street and collected information about the time when the procession would arrive from the temple. There were no fixed schedules in such things, but I figured out that the ritual would be over before daybreak. I decided to reach there at about two in the morning.

I had my dinner in a hotel and drove down to the house. It was absolutely quiet all around at nine in the evening and the house was in total darkness. I locked the car after taking out my bag, switched on the torch I was carrying and entered the house after unlocking the door. I switched on all the lights. Everything was the same as I had last seen. I sat on the bed, drank water form the bottle I carried and took out my papers and camera from the bag.

Just then the voltage dipped and the lights dimmed. My earlier fears came back to me. I looked up from the table and saw that Subhadra still adorned the wall and the band of holy threads was round the mask. I stood up and paid obeisance and also became aware of the sea and the casurina trees outside. My eyes moved beyond the bedroom door to the staircase running up and a shiver ran down my spine. I could clearly hear my heartbeats.

The dim light inside the room was playing hide and seek with me. The room had a funereal look. The sound of the waves and the wailing of the casurina trees coming in from outside added to the gloom. I set the alarm to 1 a.m. and tried to snatch a little sleep.

I had never experienced the kind of fear that pressed me down after I had switched the light off and lay on bed. The idea of sleep vanished suddenly and all kinds of supernatural apprehensions took hold of me. The hammering on my heart increased manifold. I knew that I couldn't stay in that house even a minute longer. I switched on the light, dressed, put my papers and camera in the bag and looked at Subhadra for one last time. That face looked as serene as ever, but that gave me no assurance. Ignoring the drawing room and the staircase, I locked the house after coming out. The desolate open space seemed to be safer than the inside of the house. I locked the gate and got into the car. I didn't have the courage to turn around to take a final look at the surreal face of that house.

I drove to a hotel straightway and booked a room. I slept like a baby in its safe heaven and woke up when the alarm went off. I dressed, picked up my camera and drove to the *chitrakar* street. The fearful experience of the evening was totally forgotten and all my thoughts were about completing the job and returning to Delhi.

I parked the car outside the lane and went to the house of the artist with the camera in hand. A puja was being conducted inside the house. My old acquaintance saw me and took me inside. I took a few photographs of the puja and came outside to sit on the verandah, waiting for the procession to arrive. No one was sure when it would come. They all said it might arrive any time. As dawn neared, more spectators started coming. I saw a foreigner in the crowd busy clicking photographs. I was tired of sitting and so walked towards her.

The woman was short, flat-nosed and of an uncertain age. She was beautiful, a Chinese or a Japanese. She too moved towards me, and smiling, gave a silent answer to my silent

greeting. I led her to the verandah and we sat and talked. The lady had come as a tourist; the guide she had hired had brought her here to see a strange ritual of the temple. I told her about my research work and the importance of this particular ritual. I gave her my card and she wrote down her name and address in Japan in my notebook.

The procession arrived from the temple. The *chirtakar* came outside, holding the pictures in his hand and the procession started moving towards the temple. I got busy in taking photographs from different angles and was sure that I had enough of them for the book. When the procession came out of the lane and turned towards the temple, I put the camera in the bag since I didn't need to document the later rituals. I looked for the Japanse lady before leaving the place. Her name was Ayumi. I remembered the name as I liked it but I had forgotten the name of the city from which she hailed. However, I didn't find her. She had perhaps left when I was busy taking photographs.

I left Puri the same day and returned to Delhi after handing over the keys to Robin. On reaching home, I gave the roll of film to my regular photo studio even though the roll was not fully exposed. I rang up Susan to tell her that the photographs would reach her in a couple of days.

This was when my problems started. When I asked for the photographs in the studio, the man at the counter pulled out a roll of negatives from an envelope and showed it to me. Half of the roll had not been exposed and the other half had turned white. There were nothing except for two circles in four of the frames. There must be a mix up, I thought; the man was showing me a wrong roll. But when he insisted that I had given that particular roll to him, I asked him to call the owner.

Anupam, the owner, was an old acquaintance. He told me that he himself had developed the roll and wondered why I had taken only four snaps. Angrily, I retorted, 'I had not taken any such photographs.'

Anupam looked at the negatives again and said, 'Something might have gone wrong with the camera.

I insisted, 'This is definitely not my film since I had never taken those four photographs.'

Anupam placed the negatives against light and examined them. He said, 'This is perhaps the close-up of a woman's bust in some painting. You had given me a number of such photographs to print earlier too.'

I looked at the twin circles in the four frames. Anupam was right. I had perhaps taken similar photographs at some time. But I had put a new roll in the camera this time only to take photographs of that procession.

Anupam said, 'Wait a while; I'll take out the prints and show you.'

I was angry and disappointed. The photographs I had taken spending so much of time, labour and money had ended up as a woman's bust. What was going to happen to my book? What could I say to my publisher? Besides, what worryied me most was how to make sense of the whole thing.

The four wet photographs handed over by Anupam didn't reveal anything new. I told Anupam, 'This is impossible. There is some mistake somewhere.'

Anupam was a calm person. He said, 'You had perhaps taken these four photographs earlier and the exposure of the rest of the roll went wrong.'

I was getting angrier listening to him. That night I had put a new film roll in the camera sitting under Subhadra's mask in that haunted house and had taken the first pictures in the *chitrakar* street. There was no point in arguing with Anupam. As I left the place with the negatives and the wet prints, I told him, 'I'll never come here again.'

By the time I reached home, I was feeling very depressed. I checked the camera accessories thoroughly in the hope that the roll might have got mixed up somehow. But there was no chance of any mistake. All my papers, negatives and contact prints were in place with their serial numbers and dates

marked on them. The negatives of the wet prints that I held in my hand were of the correct roll. I went to Anupam that afternoon again in a worried state hoping against hope that some mix-up might have occurred in the studio.

Anupam took me inside his studio and sent for tea. He said, 'There is absolutely no possibility of such mistakes in this place. I went through everything again after you left. Those negatives came from your roll.'

Exasperated, I said, 'I had not taken any such photographs. I had taken photographs of people on a street in Puri; not of breast in close-up.'

I took out the four prints and handed them over to him, saying, 'No one would say that these are photographs of a woman's breasts unless he has a dirty mind.'

Anupam remarked, 'I know. Earlier, you had often given me many photographs to process from *Kamasutra* manuscripts. I thought this was something like that.'

I replied sternly, 'How is it possible that some other photographs would come out in the negatives instead of the pictures I took?'

Anupam was quiet for a while. Then he said, 'Do you know about spirit photography? Certain non-existent things enter the frame while taking photographs. You take a photograph of two persons, but find a third person standing behind them when you take out the print. There are many such examples in the annals of photography.'

I saw that the matter was coming back to ghosts again in a roundabout way. Tea came, and as I sipped, I said, 'How did fifty people vanish from my roll and how could the close-up of women's breasts get into four frames? And the other frames are blank. This is not possible even in spirit photography.'

I was extremely disappointed as I took his leave. I decided that I would drown my woes in drinks and telephone the publisher the next morning that the book be published without the essential photographs.

But another surprise was waiting for me at home. A thick envelope had arrived in the mail that day and inside it lay photographs of the procession in Puri. These were the photographs taken by Ayumi. I looked for a letter inside the envelope, but it contained nothing except the photographs. There was no address of the sender on the envelope. I took out my notebook in which Ayumi had written down her address. Even after searching minutely, I could not find the address in the notebook. I could vaguely recall her face, but had no idea how I was going to thank her. I turned the envelope around again. My address had been written in beautiful handwriting. The letter had come from some place in India, but the post-office stamp was smudged. Silently, I told the vaguely remembered face, 'Many, many thanks, Ayumi, wherever you may be.' I also gave the good news to Anupam over the phone.

I recovered my sense and selected the photographs that would go with the text. When I gave the photographs to Susan the next day, I thought I would tell her about my strange experience, but felt that something that seemed like a miracle to me might not hold any attraction for others. Susan started selecting the photographs she needed. I had kept those four photographs with this set by mistake. She kept them aside, selected only four photographs out of the lot and returned the rest to me. She asked, 'Who is to be given credit for these photographs?'

I said, 'To the author.'

Susan looked at the photographs again and said, 'That is not possible. You are there in every photograph along with the temple servants.' I thought of telling her about Ayumi, but that would have meant a lot of explaining. So I said, 'Any name will do.'

I rang up Susan when I reached home to say that I had left four photographs not needed by her in her office. I realised that these were those strange photographs which I had not taken. I told her, 'I don't need them any longer.'

In a few months, the proofreading, layout, cover design, etc. relating to my book on *pata* paintings were complete and the book got published. I shook off this phase of research work from my life and concentrated on other work. One day my publisher informed me that he was arranging a small party in his house for the release of the book. I had been to many of his parties earlier and so I knew that these were mainly social gatherings; the book was a mere excuse.

I reached his house at the appointed time, exactly at seven on a winter evening. No one except Susan was present. My publisher-friend said, 'There is another get-together at a different place today; our friends will come a bit late. But we do not have to wait for them; let's get started with the drinks.'

He handed over glasses to Susan and me and went inside to look after the arrangements for the evening.

About a dozen of my books had been arranged on a table in the drawing room. Susan picked up a copy, and leafing through it, said, 'The book has come out nicely.'

I replied, 'If you are talking about the get-up of the book, then the credit goes to you for bringing it out so beautifully.'

Susan said, 'I was talking about the book. You must have taken a lot of trouble to write it.'

I said, 'The most difficult part was going to Puri as per your instructions and photograph the last pictures.'

There were no other guest except for the two of us. So I told Susan about the mystery surrounding those photographs. I felt a strange sensation running through me yet again when I talked about the time I spent in that haunted house in Puri, the Subhadra mask, the sudden appearance and disappearance of the Japanese woman that fateful night, the damage to the film roll by some unseen force and finally the miraculous arrival of the much-needed photographs. Susan listened to me in rapt attention and asked several questions. She seemed amused to listen to me with her glass in hand and a cigarette dangling from her lips. Her eyes narrowed when I came to the end of the narration. Looking straight at me she asked an unrelated question, 'You also write stories, don't you?'

I asked, 'What do you mean?'

Susan said, 'What you have told me is a well-structured mystery story.'

I said, 'But everything I told you is one hundred per cent true. I told you every incident in the sequence it has actually happened. There is not even a bit of exaggeration anywhere.'

The next guest of the evening arrived. I stood up and greeted him, and as he went over to talk to the publisher, I came back and sat with Susan again. She said, 'Let me tell you that I am currently editing a mystery book: Sherlock Holmes in Kolkata.'

I replied, 'I had read a Bengali story a long time back about how Srijukta Saralakhya Home and his assistant Batu Sen solved a puzzling crime.'

Susan said, 'No, in this novel the real Holmes comes from England to Kolkata. Watson is not there with him, but the Bengali psychologist Prof. Mukherjee, a pen-friend of Freud, is assisting him. They are busy unfolding the mystery of an unusual crime that has taken place in the ashram of a controversial godman. Does this prelude interest you?'

I said, 'Sure. But what has this got to do with my story?'

We greeted another guest who arrived then and came back to our seats again. Susan said, 'My mind was inspired by Holmes while editing this novel. I can see many loose ends in your story which the great detective could have easily tied up.'

'For example?' I asked.

'The first thing is colour. Of course, it's natural that this should come up in your story since you were doing research on coloured *pata* paintings at the time. But I am talking about a specific colour.'

'What colour? I have not said anything about any colour in my ghost story.'

'Yellow, which is the colour of Subhadra.

"The explantion for that is Banambar had given me the mask of Subhadra. Had he given me the mask of Jagannath or Balabhadra, I would have hung that on the wall. But why did he give me the mask of Subhadra?'

'Elementary, my dear Watson!' Susan now used the wisdom acquired through my research to the full and added, 'The artists make the masks of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra in sets, like the one you had presented me. But some foreign tourists buy only the masks of Jagannath and Balabhadra as the mask of Subhadra is different in shape and size from the other two. The mask of poor Subhadra gets left behind with the artist.'

'Alright. But what is the significance of the yellow colour?'

Quoting from my book, Susan told me, 'According to Bharat's *rasa* theory, the yellow colour is the sign of the *adbhuta* or strange sentiment. You also told me that the tantric who came to you had given you a packet of turmeric powder. What do you make of that?'

'There nothing strange in that. Turmeric is used on festive occasions. I can't see any great mystery in this.'

'I am coming back to my original theory. It was Subhadra who came to your rescue in the end. In the garb of the Japanese woman.'

Susan finished her drink and stood up pulling the last puff of her cigarette. She asked, 'What is the colour of the Japanese?'

The other guests had arrived by that time. The book was released formally, but I had no interest in that. Everyone got busy in drinking and eating. I was thinking about what Susan had told me. Her explanation was quiet imaginative. But I was not able to decide whether it solved the problem or made it even more complex. I was by now bored with the party though others seemed to be enjoying themselves. Susan was now busy in some serious discussion with another writer.

The guests started leaving and I, too, took leave of everyone to return home. When I shook hands with Susan, she said, 'I hope I solved all your mysteries?'

'You didn't tell me if Sherlock Holmes has any opinions on the spirit photography of my camera.'

Susan laughed a little drunk and indulgently. She said, 'I was about to tell you about it when I was called away. I will fill you in on the telephone.'

I rang her two days later when Susan's call didn't come. Before I could say anything, she said, 'I couldn't telephone you as I was busy. Do you have any objection if I take over from Sherlock Holmes?'

'No, I said.'

'You use a microlens in your camera, don't you?'

'Yes, 'I replied, 'I use it to take close-ups of miniature pictures.'

'You use one camera for both coloured as well as black-and-white photographs and often replace the roll after taking a few photographs with a different roll.'

I again said, 'Yes.' I could now see what conclusion she was trying to draw from all these. I added, 'Yes. It's possible that after taking a couple of black-and-white photographs, I might have removed the roll and put a coloured roll in the camera in its place. I might have used the half-used roll again later. But...'

Susan interjected to say, 'Other people also use your camera at times.'

I was forced to say, 'Yes.'

In spite of all the precautions, I had seen others fiddling with my camera - the gardener, Banambar and Dhadia, the rickshawpuller. I had also myself allowed them to take a few photographs with my camera. I knew what she was trying to say. Someone else had taken those four photographs without my knowledge and the roll had got mixed up with the other rolls. Without allowing me to think any more, Susan said, 'All the four photographs are lying before me now. These are not photographs of human anatomy. These are the photographs of Jagannath's eyes taken from a painting through a micro-lens.'

Eyes - that's right! I should have realised long ago what Susan had figured it out. It had not struck me since I was too much concerned about the mystery surrounding the

photographs. However, I didn't concede defeat and asked, 'But what happened to the photographs I had taken of the procession that night?'

Instead of giving a straight answer, Susan said, 'Some mysteries are not solved; they remain mysteries. You may sometime write a story on that.'

Forget about writing a story, I didn't even want to think about it after Susan's Holmesean analysis. But I recalled all these several years later when I was discussing about my research work with Mike, a student from America. More than one book had been published in the meantime on Orissan paintings and scholars from India and abroad were now interested in the subject. Mike had come on a fellowship to write a book *Raghunathpur Revisited* on the *chitrakar* village.

I was at Bhuaneswar at the time and I told Mike about my brush with ghosts among other things. I do not know what he thought of this mystery story. When we started out for Puri a few days later, Mike wanted to look at that haunted house. I also wanted to see the house again where I had spent some unforgettable days of my life. When I rang up Robin, he said, 'You have telephoned me at the right time. A builder is going to demolish that house and build a new one at that place.'

Mike and I started out for Puri after collecting the key from Robin. It was evening by the time we reached Puri and I told Mike that we should first take a look at the haunted house and then go to a hotel. My heart missed a beat when our car stopped in front of that house. But I was not alone today. When we got in and switched on the light, I found the house in the same state as I had left it many years back. The lights were burning brightly and the drawing room didn't look as shrouded in mystery as I had found it earlier. I thought I could even go up the staircase without fear to unravel the mystery of that dungeon, if I so wished.

That mask of Subhadra and the band of threads were missing from the wall above the study table. But other furniture were there as before. It would remain that way until the

builder demolished the house. We moved around the rooms silently. I wanted to go back to the mysterious days I had spent there and tried to listen to the wailing of the sea and the casurina trees, but the fear-filled eerie feeling was no longer there in the air.

I switched off the lights in all the rooms, and finally locked the front door after switching off the drawing-room light. Leaving the dark house behind, we crossed the small garden and reached the gate. At that moment, a strange thing happened. The light in the drawing room suddenly lit up. I got a start. Mike too was stupefied for a moment. I had no desire to go back and switch off that spectral light. Mike was trying to say something, but I pulled him away and said, 'Let us go.'

Mike had a logical mind and I knew what he was trying to say. The electric lines were old and connections were loose in such old houses. Or the switches didn't work properly. Or the tubelights took some time to be lit up. Or some such explanation. But I didn't need any explanation to the mystery this time. All mysteries could perhaps be explained, I thought silently, but as Susan had said, some mysteries should be allowed to remain mysteries.

# The Long Life of Poetry

DEVNATH OPENED his eyes amidst the light and sounds coming through the windows. These days he didn't follow a daily routine. He ate when he felt hungry, slept when he felt sleepy and got up when his eyes opened. He had slept well last night, and he felt fine this morning. He stretched his hand and picked up the pillow that had fallen on the floor, and put on his glasses kept on the nearby table. He could not see clearly; he wiped the glasses and realised that he would now have to get another pair. That reminded him of many other jobs which needed attention, and with an effort he banished all these from his mind. There was no point in keeping an account of all that he had forgotten to do. If something could be deferred till tomorrow, why do it today?

Hari Master's servant boy placed a glass of hot tea before him as he sat near the table after washing his face. He was grateful to have such a loving family near him. Tea always reached him the moment he got up from bed; the thali came when he felt hungry.

Devnath took out a biscuit from a jar on the shelf, dipped it in his tea and looked at the wisp of faint smoke going up. He decided to take out warm clothes from the box tucked under his bed. There was a slight chill in the air since the last few days, but he had been deferring this small chore. He had not even read yesterday's newspaper until now. He picked it up from the table and ran his eyes over it. None of the news interested him, and after turning the pages, he went back to the line he had seen in an advertisement for some furniture: ah, that home is indeed like heaven. Mulling over

it for a while, he tried to recall the second line of that familiar couplet. No, it was of no use. It rhymed with an arrangement of words like...where rules... But what was the word before that? What rules? Beautiful furniture? Could he write a new line to rhyme with the first one? He had to rearrange the first line before that, with a mark of exclamation perhaps: Heavenlike, ah, is that home! If he wrote 'oh' in place of 'ah'? If he shuffled the words around: that home, ah, is heavenlike? Or, that home, oh, is heavenlike?

There was a time when all his time was spent playing around with words. His mind worked incessantly like a dictionary and a thesaurus put together. There was an unusual joy in substituting a new word for an old one, putting two or three-letter words in place of one having four and the other having two letters. Making up a line and breaking it up again. Moving around brackets and exclamation marks. There was an excitement in using old words to make up new proverbs. There was a perverse pleasure in rejecting alliterations that crept in so effortlessly into the composition.

And was the page-long live poem that finally took shape before him what he exactly wanted? Was it the same form inside his mind which had taken an outward shape now? How much did the recollection of the morning reflect the dreams of the night? When he read the finished poem, it sometimes seemed to be perfect, while at other times it seemed as if a lot had been left unsaid. It was like the painting of the eyes to complete the beautiful earthen image – the want of some special touch. The journey into the world of thoughts started all over again, waiting for a boon from the wish-fulfilling goddess of words. The pen again moved on the blank sheet. No more playing around with words, now it was the stratagem for a cold war with them.

Moving his eyes away from the world of the newspaper, Devnath looked around the harsh reality of his bed, table and chairs. Like him, all these were aged and dilapidated. He suddenly recalled the famous easy chair of Rabindranath, although there was no similarity between the rickety old chair

on which he sat and the fancy chair which had crossed the seven seas to reach Shantiniketan as a gift of love from an Argentinian lady. Still, out of context, Devnath imagined his own chair to be echoing the sentiments of Gurudev's chair - pitiful and sad, the silent suffering of emptiness pervades the house bereft of the beloved.

Unrelated lines of poetry entered his mind in this manner at times and tortured him. Sometimes a beautiful rhyme of few words would caress the innermost depths of his mind like the pangs of a lost love. Devnath woke up from his reverie and became circumspect again. Why should he disown his easy life and seek asylum in some false surreal world? He felt well today. It was sunny outside. He could easily walk up to the street square. No, he had no complaints against life. On the other hand, he must admit that fate had dealt him a decent hand. Otherwise, how could he have simply walked into his paternal house, had a tenant like Hari Master and a market conveniently located at a walking distance? He was even more fortunate to have the highway running near his village to facilitate the transport of iron ore to the steel plant, and a dhaba and a liquor shop in the market square to cater to the needs of truckers.

The boy placed the tiffin tray before him as he was about to change and go outside. Food was available at the dhaba in the market square but breakfast always arrived on time from Hari Master's house. Why should he eat outside? He finished breakfast and left the plate outside and came out of the house. He had only to take a short walk to reach the highway - an altogether different world.

The traffic on the road was getting heavier by the minute. One after another truck carrying iron ore raced away. One more line of poetry forced its way into his mind despite himself: the final deliverance of the prehistoric iron age. He could not recall the next line. There were words like primeval times, accursed men, which were followed by other words like the turn of the wheel, steel, steel. It seemed like ages now. Steel was the only thing that mattered at the time - the

social and political environs had been burning with the demands for a steel plant. Vociferous demands for steel had intermingled with the singing of the patriotic, 'Vande Utkal Janani'. That dream too was fulfilled in due course. The steel plant was set up. The green shoreline and the dense forests of the patriotic song gradually took a new shape. There was now a red layer of iron ore dust on the greenery on either side of the road.

The liquor shop would not have opened yet, but customers had started reaching the place early in the morning. Perhaps it was illegal to have a liquor shop in the place. Perhaps the crowded market on that square itself was illegal too. Devnath sometimes imagined that the place was a temporary camp of nomads put up for a few days; the transient, bustling camp had come up only that morning and would not be there when he came again the next morning. He would find only the open field of red soil before him.

The bench on which he sat daily was vacant. He wiped it clean and took his seat. When a burst of chilly wind hit him, he wrapped the shawl close around him. The rays of the sun were still gentle; gradually it would get real hot which one would not notice after downing a couple. The shop had bamboo screens around to prevent outsiders from looking in. Devnath signalled the shopkeeper sitting amid glasses, bottles and plastic jars inside the low, thatched house. A full bottle and a glass materialised before him in no time. Fried gram would come with the second bottle. He was an old and regular customer; the owner of the shop knew exactly what he needed when. The glass had not been washed properly; a few flies buzzed around it. The jingling of the glasses and bottle chimed with the humming of the flies. These sounds echoed his first introduction to words and sounds in the first book of his childhood: *Ding dong goes the bell; tick tock goes the clock.*

There was no poetry now; only words. In his childhood, there was sheer poetry in the words of the primer, unrelated words which had nothing to do with each other. Round and

round the eddy was made to rhyme with uncle's teddy. Or, a group of lame men sitting in a circle, talked to each other with a happy chuckle. The very idea of some special folks merrily busy gossiping created a poetic mood. He looked up at the sound of cawing overhead and his hand automatically covered his glass. The crow is gruff and uncouth, but it is also the harbinger of good news. The swan might be sent as a messenger like the cloud-messenger in Sanskrit poetry. But a crow-messenger? What kind of poetry could be written about the crow? The raven? Edger Allan Poe? Not any more! Never!

Some other customers had arrived by this time. They would talk among themselves and never bothered him. Who knows what they made of him? Only once had someone come to him and asked, 'Sir, you write poetry, no?'

Devnath could not hear him right the first time; he looked questioningly at the man. The man came closer and said, 'Poetry; you write poetry, don't you?'

Devnath was a bit amazed but happy and nodded in the affirmative. The sobriquets of a poet got stuck when one had written poetry once; it didn't matter if he had not written for years thereafter. He himself didn't remember when he had written his last poem.

'I want to get a couplet written at the back of my truck', the man said with a natural ease.

Devnath recalled that he had received such customised requests to write wedding songs during his college days. There was a tradition at the time to print eulogies meant for the bride and the groom and distribute them among the guests. He wrote a few lines at times out of sheer exasperation and without making any real effort, but his friends later informed him that the songs were greatly appreciated. The truck driver said, 'But the couplet has to be real good; good enough to take on the Hindi ones.'

Someone had asked him to write after so many years. There was a time when he received repeated reminders from editors of magazines; singers didn't let him alone with their entreaties to write lyrics for them. All this now seemed to

have taken place in an earlier birth. The truck driver brought a bottle from the shop and placed it before him after he had agreed to his request. Advance payment for poetry on order! Devnath felt that he had taken on a heavy responsibility as he took a drink from the new bottle. Writing a cheap rhyming couplet seemed too tough for him now. He thought of a jingle in order to release himself from the obligation: no beginning, no end; no enemy, no friend. But he didn't like either its meaning or its language or the rhyme. Besides, every truck carried some such message at its back!

For the next few days, he got busy in rearranging these two lines or trying to write a new couplet. The few words only got shuffled around as he kept at the job with all seriousness, but a good rhyme would not come. He hoped he would never meet that trucker again. The man sometimes came to the shop when Devnath was present there. Even though he never reminded him about it, Devnath could not forget the advance he had been given. Once when they came face to face, Devnath took out a small notebook and pen from his pocket and placed them on the table just to show that he had not forgotten his commitment. The man seated at a distant table looked at him and smiled, but did not make any further effort to communicate with him.

Devnath was scared that the man would some day confront him and demand his couplet for the bottle of booze. He tried to calculate how many bottles he could reasonably get in exchange for a whole poem. The man never turned up again. Even if he had not been able to complete the jingle, Devnath would look out for the man since he was his living testimony to being a poet. But the man never came again. How fast things changed in a few days! The thatched roof of the wine shop had given way to a pucca structure. The furniture was now of a better quality and more expensive. The man had perhaps left the state and gone elsewhere to start life afresh. It was also quite possible that some accident had taken his life.

Even this minor aberration in the unexciting life of Devnath was a thing of the past like his own childhood - the slow pace of childhood and youth spent in the village. The memory of freedom fighters, tricolour in hand, parading down the village roads, was more fresh in his mind than his personal sorrows and happiness or the village festivities. 'Come under the flag if you believe in Gandhi, lose your identity in the waves of freedom'- there was perhaps no poetry in such songs, but there was great excitement. It had no music, but there was a strange elation in the group singing the patriotic lines. The poetry was a mere footnote to the flag. Then came *Inquilab Zindabad* - a one-page song about a boy martyr selling at two paise apiece, it was about a 12-year old laughingly braving bullets. Poetry was song; reading meant singing; getting at the meaning was not through reclusive reading, but through processions. Then came poetry's new age when a modern poet wrote his memorable lines about the martyr in a new idiom- 'this is no funeral pyre, friends, this is the wick of freedom burning eternally in the country's darkness.' And later came Alfred J. Prufrock to pull him out of the golden enchantment of daffodils.

The convulsions that took place inside his chest while reading Eliot for the first time in college still sent shivers down the spine. At the time he sought out and read western poetry like a mad man. He had managed to find the meaning of the six lines of Dante in italics under the title 'Prufrock.' After class, he discussed poetry with his professor. He wanted to find out the meaning and context of the symbols, hints and indirect references in poems. It was as if he had to understand each line and each word of the poems he read. The professor advised him to steer clear of the difficult words and complex expressions which acted as hurdles and read the composition since only then would he enjoy reading poetry. But Devnath was not convinced. How could he segregate such parts from a poem? Those hurdles against which he stumbled were the real poetry for him: poetry that was meaningful in its own meaninglessness.

He stayed in his uncle's house in town to study in college. He had created his own world by piling together all his papers in the small room he had been given to stay. He had no interest in games or movies like other boys; he sat for hours together when he chanced upon a book. All the libraries in the town were familiar to him and all his friends had a fondness for literature. Being a quiet, gentle and deferential young man, he mostly kept to himself and was loved by everyone at home in spite of it. No one ever upbraided him for spending all his time with books.

All the poems that he had written during his school days were in a bound notebook. He looked at poetry from a different angle when he came to town and read new poems and especially the English poets. When he read his poems from the old notebook, they seemed to be extremely dry, ordinary and hackneyed. Angrily, he tore the notebook into pieces and threw it away and started writing in a new notebook. He wrote a couple of lines, crossed them out and wrote something else. Sometimes he was able to write ten lines at a stretch and at other times he could not write even one line. But he never gave up; he persisted until the poem was complete. Then he started sending his poems to magazines. Finally, one day, one of his poems got published in a prominent literary journal.

Beyond poetry, he had little personal life. He knew that he had to find a job and set up his home once he finished college. And that came to pass too. He got a minor job in a small government office; he found a small house on a nondescript street and started his mediocre life. His wife was an amiable person and not very ambitious. His three-member family - yes, a son had been born to them in due time - managed quite well with his meagre salary. Devnath led a contented life within the narrow bounds. Contented because he had a greater world beyond his social life and temporal affairs - that of poetry. To be truthful, he roamed in an unending and all-encompassing universe yond this world ever since he had become an ardent devotee of Tagore.

Be that as it may, the poet had to return, at the end of the day, to his two-room house from that other world of his. He had to do the shopping, ensure the welfare of the children and cater to the social demands of relatives and neighbours. These were matters which he would have preferred to ignore. These were matters which Rabindranath had jestfully described as the basis of the writing of the modern poet: the wine shop in neighbourhood, the altercations between husband and wife morning and evening, the empty capless bottle of oil, the comb with broken teeth, the last, thin slice of the cake of soap and so forth. Devnath believed that these subjects didn't make for poetry. Hence, he kept himself as much aloof from the household chores as possible Luckily, his wife took complete charge of the household. In his own house, Devnath turned into a paying guest, and he was happy to hand over the salary to his wife on the first of each month.

He remained a paying guest for ever. He had arranged a cook for himself when he first started living in the village. But Devnath let Hari Master take care of him when he came as a tenant. He wound up his own kitchen and ate with Hari Master. He didn't take any money from him towards the rent, but when he offered some money to Hari Master, he refused outright.

But now, sitting under the gentle sun in the open space in front of the wine shop and sipping from his glass, he was not thinking of his family of yore. He was assailed more by lines of poems than the memories of his personal life. Tagore seemed to have had a complete hold over him at that time. Looking skyward he was searching for some curious star between the day's first sun and the last sun of the day, to whose question there was no answer. The mind turned euphoric when he thought of Gurudev. Everything seemed to be a cut above the commonplace - the sea of great humanity, the innermost heart which opened up the being, the man-child playing on the earth's shores!

Devnath had been disappointed when Gurudev wrote about the dog with wounds all over the body, dead mice,

the fish in the pot of hot oil, dirty socks and disgusting flies. The same Vishwa Kavi, who once thought that there was nothing great about the fact of the train running on steam, later wrote poems like 'Night Train' and 'Station.' But Devnath had got caught up in the cosmic phase of the poet. Deleting all the dry prose from life and poetry, he himself remained engrossed in unearthly things like love, time, death, immortality and relationships. He used up his life's sap in writing poetry.

He also got recognition and honours for that. He definitely enjoyed the glory of being a poet. He was held in high esteem in the society even though he held a lowly job. The editors of magazines pampered him. He was invited to recite his poems. Writers and charmed readers were his friends. He lived according to the typical schedule of a poet as laid down by Sanskrit aestheticians: the poet should sleep for six hours, read for three hours in the morning after finishing his daily chores, write for three hours or revise what he had written the day before, participate in the criticism of his compositions in the company of his friends in the afternoon and then revise them. In the process of living in this manner for a few years, two books of Devnath's poems were published. His poems found place in poetry anthologies and were translated into other languages. Side by side, his son became older, his wife became more sickly, more religious and more cantankerous; and Devnath became even more irresponsible with regard to his family.

He would move to the verandah when the sun was a bit more harsh. But it was all right at this time to sit here. More and more customers arrived as time rolled by. His was a known face in the place, and perhaps everyone knew that he was a literary man. Hence, he received some respect from everyone; no one occupied his usual seat. He picked up his glass and took a small sip. He drank slowly and in small measure since he spent a long time there. Everyone considered him irresponsible, but he was very careful about his drinking. Once he had fallen down on the road when he had taken more than his normal quota. Ordinarily, he took a rickshaw

at such times, but he was unable to find a rickshaw that day. He was confined to the house for a long time after that. Hari Master was put into unnecessary trouble because of him. He took him twice to the hospital in the nearby town, bought medicines for him and took care of his dietary needs.

Devnath was very careful from then onwards. He didn't have any right to put others to trouble. Notwithstanding the disturbances taking place in the world within him, he was determined to be careful in the world outside, making sure that he remained in good health and paid others the consideration due to them. He could surely do this irrespective of how his mind wavered. But there was no way to rein in the mind. A couple of lines seemed to barge into his head at the time: 'beyond the earthly night, it kept shining bright.' At a more creative time in his life, he might have written a whole poem using these phrases. Arranging the two lines in different ways and adding more words in the beginning and end of the lines. He might have carried his thoughts towards a definite conclusion in a last line adorned with metaphors and complete in itself. A perfect poem flaunting its plentitude would have appeared before him on the piece of paper. Now he was left only with the pleasant memories of those highly fecund days.

Like someone told him one day that a renowned critic had written a piece praising his poems. Or that some author had used four lines from one of his poems as epigraph to his novel. It was even discussed that a writer had written a whole story based on his life. Devnath read the story. It was about a crazy poet. Devnath's friends perhaps considered him to be insane and that is why they found similarities between him and the poet in the story. Even though there was a similarity between his name and the name of the poet in the story, Devnath didn't find any other resemblance. His poems were totally different; the poet in the story was decadent and irresponsible while he himself was a sedate family man. But, despite so many dissimilarities, he sometimes felt that he had some affinity with Bhavnath, the protagonist of the story.

He recalled that it was Kusum who had taken a lot of trouble to locate the magazine where the story had been published. He was always filled with love and affection when he thought of Kusum. When he thought of his wife, her face never got reflected in his mind, her name never came to his lips. But when he thought of Kusum, he felt like repeating her name again and again like a *mantra*: Kusum, Kusum, Kusum. Kusum's features floated up before him when he closed his eyes. He felt like comparing her features with every passing girl. Poetry came to mind when he thought of Kusum.

He had wanted to lead an easy and simple life, but this was not to be. A common belief is that the poet is a romantic animal who way leads a ward, Bohemian life and the society may not expect anything from him except some dreams set in rhyme. But Devnath himself didn't live in that kind of dream world. He lived like the common man, did his honest day's office work, was punctual and faithful to his wife. If he was not acceptable in society, it was because he spent all his leisure time reading and writing, without any socialising. He had deprived himself of games, movies, friends and entertainment. It could be said that he had withdrawn himself from society for the sake of poetry. Unfortunately, the same poetry, for which he had shunned everyone, left him one day, never to return again.

It was getting hot when a stray cloud floated in and it was no longer unpleasant in the open. Devnath tried to guess the time. He didn't wear a watch these days. How did it matter anyway to know the exact time? When others ordered food from the nearby dhaba and sat down to eat, he knew it was time for lunch. There would be food for him at home. Earlier, they worried if he didn't come back in time for lunch; now they knew that he would eat at the dhaba and return in the evening. His usual rickshawpuller came at such times to take him home if he did not have any other errands. He was not there today. Looking at the sky, he decided to stay on instead of going home. He was

tired sitting in the same place since morning; he decided to move to the grass patch near the bamboo screen. He picked up his glass and went there. Rather than sit, he lay down comfortably on the grass.

This place seemed exactly like the patch of grass beside the bootlegger's shop behind the radio station where he had spent many a pleasant time in the good old days. The big town of today was a cluster of small villages then. There was a lot of open space, scattered bushes and shrubs, and dilapidated structures. Country liquor was made at one such place and everyone would head for it once the day's work was over. There were no bottles and glasses; liquor was stored in large earthen pots and customers were ladled out the drinks in small earthen cups. They would carry a *kulhad* each and sitting on the patch of grass pass the day in idle gossip.

Devnath had never even thought in his dreams that he would ever drink liquor, or that he would give up writing poetry and write songs for films. He mulled over the past at times, but he was not sure if he could have avoided this metamorphosis. Song was poetry in the early phases of literature; the lyricist was the poet. Later came two distinct streams. Those who wrote songs only did not get the respect of a poet. Hence, he felt a bit insulted when a radio singer requested him to write a song for him. He had perhaps given a piece of his mind to the man at the time, for the singer had retorted, 'You call yourself a devotee of Rabindranath, don't you? What is Gitanjali if not a collection of songs?'

Devnath found himself in an awkward situation. Still he argued, 'Many of the poems of Gitanjali have not yet been set to tune and those poems would not have qualified for a place in Gitabitan.'

The singer went back that day, but when the most famous, successful and popular singer of the time asked him to write a song and said that he would set one of his poems to tune if he didn't write a special song for him, he could not refuse. Devnath wrote a customised song to his order keeping the

length of the lines, the rhyming and the number of words as given by him. He had thought it to be his first and last song written to order. But, to his misfortune, the particular piece came out as an extraordinarily beautiful song set to lilting music by the music director and sung in the mellifluous voice of the singer. In a few days, the light love song had become very popular and could be heard everywhere.

It was a strange experience for Devnath. How many people read poetry? Or understood poems? Or even wanted to understand? But the song was on everyone's lips. The words might lose their meaning, but the tune remained etched in memory. When there were more requests for songs, Devnath gave up writing poetry and concentrated on writing songs. There was a different kind of excitement in writing songs. The words had to be coaxed out to a form in a poem; they had to be drilled into submission while writing a song. The message in poetry was camouflaged in many ways so that the reader would read it again and again and interpret it in his own way. The song was a direct conversation with the listener and would touch a chord in him with the first pronouncement. Poetry was dependent on words; in a song, music assisted the words or the words supported the music. Many a times, the music director hummed a tune for him and it was left to Devnath to write a song to fit the tune.

Poetry was written in solitude - one had to talk to oneself in solitude and have a dialogue with oneself to write poetry on a piece of paper. But the song was a collaborative effort: the lyricist, the singer and the music director joined hands to produce the finished product which finally reached the listener. Devnath, who had lived alone for a long time, had to now enter the greater family of music with its singers, music directors and musicians. The circle went on increasing beyond the radio to reach the record company and then finally the cinema.

Another problem that came along was the organisation of the time at his disposal. Earlier, he read and wrote in the morning, and left home when it was time to go to office. But the demands of music were of a different kind - sometimes

they needed it immediately and at other times changes had to be made at short notice. He had to adjust his time according to others' convenience. But, gradually, Devnath stopped disliking experience of moving around in the world of music. Most of the people in this world remained awake till late in the night and woke up late. Devnath had to join them quite often during office hours. He, who had never neglected his duties until then, had to go out frequently during office hours those days. Memos were issued to him and finally, he was asked for explanations for dereliction of duty.

When he told his friends about this, one of them said, 'You better resign from that cheap job. You'll find you can earn much more from writing songs.' In fact, he had already started earning some money from his songs. As an approved lyricist, he received payment for all his songs that were broadcast. The record companies paid him well too. On hearing about his problems at office, another friend said, 'Why should you resign? It's a government job; nothing will happen whether you work or not. They will issue letters to you; you could write back to them. And, in no time, it will be retirement time. Why should you lose your pension?

Devnath liked the advice. Many of his colleagues in the office did no work but collected their salary at the end of the month. At least, he had never neglected his duties until then. Even if he left office, he made it a point to complete the work assigned to him. Of course, he could not do this for long. One of the main reasons for this was his taking to drinking.

The dictum that an artist leads a wayward, uncontrolled and irresponsible life was perhaps especially applicable to musicians. They had to show they were different not only in clothes, but also in their conduct - and one aspect of this was drinking. Of course, as a lyricist, Devnath didn't have to be present all the time in such a group, but he aligned himself with the group under the pretext that he might be needed any time. These people would move around in an unused corner of the radio station amid musical instruments and the like throughout the day and would walk down to a nearby teashop

when they had a bit of time to relax. More often they would go to the booze shop which was not far-off. Devnath would accompany them there with his glass of tea in hand. One day, he finally tasted a bit of booze and spat it out.

After a few sips of the stuff in this manner over a number of weeks, he no longer found it unpalatable. And on discovering the heady effect it had on him Devnath became its devotee. He now recalled all this while lying on the grass. When he closed his eyes, it was no longer possible to differentiate between the past, the present and the future; everything got mixed up and became hazy. Devnath could not have imagined at one time that someone like him who was content to live within his limit, who was disciplined and conscious of the world around him would one day turn into a drunkard and an outcast. But this metamorphosis did take place, though extremely slowly.

The other change that took place was his demotion from a poet to lyricist in the eyes of his critics and readers. There are no readers for a lyricist; songs do not get published in any magazines or books and they only have listeners. Besides, since new songs came to the market in quick succession, an impression was created that while poetry was eternal, songs provided only temporary excitement and had a lifespan of only eight days. There was no logic in this, just as it is not right to conclude that popular literature is not good literature. The editors balked at publishing when Devnath sent songs instead of poems to magazines. There was no possibility of publishing a collection of lyrics. He conceded that he was no longer a poet; he was only a lyricist.

Despite this acceptance, what hurt him most was that he had no control over the subject of his writings. Movie-makers simply explained the scenes to him – hero sitting all by himself on a river bank after coming back from the cremation ground, heroine's plight after seeing off her lover at the railway station, or two girls teasing each other, and so on – he had to write songs for such situations. He wrote many such songs for the radio, record companies and movies, and some of

them were so popular that he became more famous as a lyricist than he ever was as a poet.

But it was not possible to draw a line once one had compromised with principles. After he started writing songs instead of poetry, he received requests to write dialogues for films. He wanted to refuse, but the producer said that the gentlemen entrusted with the job had suddenly disappeared, and he would incur a huge loss if Devnath did not come to his rescue. He also agreed to pay him well for this. Devnath agreed to it despite himself and he was happy to receive the money.

That was not the end of the matter. Producers now requested him to write songs with a doubt entendre. Of course, they did not say it in so many words, but said that the song should cater to the common people as also to the elite. A producer cited a song as an example which seemed alright on the surface, but a close look revealed indecent descriptions of the female anatomy and lewd description of sexual acts in every line. Devnath refused at first, but was persuaded to write a song which contained reference to physical love but was not vulgar. However, the producer altered his lines and the song that finally appeared in the film was highly obscene. The song, however, became a big hit and when cassettes carrying his name were sold, Devnath had no further reservations about writing such songs.

One of the memorable events of his movie days was to go to Kolkata for the first time for the shooting of a film for which he had written the lyrics. He had wanted to go to Kolkata for a long time to meet the poets and writers there and specially to visit Gurudev's house. But the producer was not inclined to take him along. Finally, he reached Kolkata without ticket through a T.T.I. friend and stayed in a cheap hotel with another friend. When he reached Tollygunge the next day, he found the unit busy in their work and no one paid him any attention. He came out of the studio along with his friend and enquired from a young man the directions to different places. The young man didn't seem to know where Jorasanko was, but he said his

name was Somen and he published a small magazine. He said he could show them around Kolkata. From his name, appearance, clothes and early-morning drunkenness it was clear that the man was a poet and the two of them decided to be his friends for the day. The place where Somen took them after changing buses twice was known as Khalasitola. In spite of the surrounding filth, this booze joint was much cleaner and prosperous compared to the booze shop near the radio station. And the drink too was less disagreeable.

After his second glass. Devnath forgot Rabindranath's house and concentrated on observing the other customers. Most of them were from the labour class, but four smartly dressed young men were seated around a table at a distance. He had heard that a few poets also frequented the joint. Were they the young foursome who ruled Kolkata after twelve in the night, as the poet said? There was no point in asking Somen for he was totally sozzled by then.

In the afternoon, Somen made them accompany him to the Kali temple. On reaching the place, they could figure out that the real haunt of Somen was the pandal around the tree in front of the temple, for everyone knew him there. Somen gave them the slip once he reached the place. The temple was closed at the time. Hence, instead of trying to find Somen, they started walking towards the address in Hartaka Lane which Somen had given them. This was Devnath's first acquaintance with a brothel and it did not turn out to be as unpleasant as he had thought. Both of them returned pretty late to the hotel and boarded the train for home the next day.

Devnath was apprehensive that he would fall sick, but he got over the feeling within a few days. On the other hand, he planned another visit to Kolkata whether the movie folks went there or not. This time he planned to keep his tryst with Jorasanko. All these days, he had forgotten the name of that girl of Harkata Lane. He remembered it all of a sudden today. It was Tilottama. The name of the girl in the radio station was Kusum. The name of his wife was Basanti. The name of his beloved was Poetry.

The changes that took place in his life were slow, but they were sure and inevitable. He was now extremely irregular in office. There was no definite time for him to return home. His food habits too became erratic. The money that he gave his wife to run the house became irregular and there was no peace at home on this count. Finally, one day Basanti left for her father's home, bag and baggage and their 14-years old son. In his state of drunkenness, Devnath did not realise that his own life was getting destroyed bit by bit.

After that things moved at a fast pace. He was asked for explanations from his office which he didn't bother to reply. Soon, he was suspended from his job. It proved a boon to him as there was no further need for him to go to office, while he got half his pay sitting at home or at the booze joint. Poetry had left him long since; he discovered that song was also about to desert him. He had now to put in a lot of effort to write a song of four lines, and what he finally wrote was not appreciated by anyone. Gradually, he became irritable and short-tempered, and started picking quarrels with people for no reason whatsoever.

Once he picked a fight with the clerk in charge of preparing bills at the radio station. It not only took a long time to receive payment for what was due to him for his lyrics, but he also had to appease a number of people in the accounts section for that. Earlier, he was not worried if payments were delayed, but now he insisted on getting paid immediately after submitting his bills. The clerk asserted that Devnath would not get any money as long as he didn't affix a revenue stamp on the bill and sign it. Earlier, they used to leave some stamps with the clerk so they would not have to look for stamps every time they submitted a bill. But the clerk asked him for a stamp that day and Devnath asked him for an account of the stamp given to him earlier. A row broke out. Kusum came and placed a stamp on the clerk's desk as they were about to come to blows. Instead of being grateful, Devnath vented his anger on Kusum and shouted at her. But the matter was put to rest at that point and the clerk paid his dues.

A few days later, Devnath went to Kusum. He begged her forgivenes for his earlier behaviour and thanked her for having helped him. When he invited her for a cup of tea, he thought Kusum would demur. But Kusum readily agreed. She came to the tea-shop with him and sat beside him on the bench. Devnath was convinced that the girl liked his poems or songs, and had come to help him that day because of that. He presented a copy of his poetry collection that he had carried with him to her and asked, 'Have you read any of my poems?'

Kusum shook her head in the negative.

'What about my songs?,' Devnath asked.

Kusum again said no.

Then she opened the book and read a little bit, turned the pages over and moved her eyes over another poem. She closed the book and said, 'I feel like crying when I read these poems.'

No one had expressed such a sentiment after reading his poetry for there was nothing in his poetry that would make someone cry. Be that as it may, Devnath liked to talk to the girl. What an irony that he had to meet this young girl so late in life! Only if he had met her when he was younger! Devnath thought of all these things, but didn't try to meet the girl again. He reminded himself that some day he would write a poem for the girl, not for publication in a magazine or for anyone to sing, but only for her to read.

That too didn't happen. Finally, he wrote a poem about steel. The atmosphere was tense at the time with demands for setting up steel plants. The government at the Centre was from a different party, and meetings were held and processions taken out regularly against it. Some of his friends joined this movement enthusiastically and pursued him to write a protest poem or song. However much he tried, not a line came out from his pen at the time. They ultimately shut him up in the house of a friend who stayed alone and said, 'No poem, no booze.'

It was thus that his most famous poem was born.

When in course of time steel plants came up in the state, Devnath thought that his poem on steel woud lose its relevance. But something which had seen the light of the day through so much drama could not fade away so easily. Even though he had written many poems which were much better, people now knew him for the few slogan-mongering lines of the poem. Whenever any new anthology of poetry came out, his steel poem found a place in it. Mercifully, no one had as yet conferred the title 'Poet of Steel' on him!

One day the head clerk of his office called him and said, 'The enquiry relating to your service is almost complete. As you are not replying to the charges framed against you, you will surely be dismissed from service now. You are entitled to pension for the number of years of service you have put in. In my opinion, you should resign from the job and take your pension.'

Devnath had worked with the head clerk for a long time and had performed his duties sincerely. He liked him and had helped him a number of times. But Devnath had severed his relationship with him after he began to live his new life. He was filled with a sense of gratitude on hearing the advice from him today. He didn't hesitate any further and wrote his resignation letter at once. And just as he had been released from him family obligations after his wife left, so he found a release from the bondage of his job.

Interviewers often asked him, 'Did you resign from your job to write poetry?' This was just a polite question for everyone knew that he had been sacked from the job as he didn't attend office; just as everyone knew that he was dead as a poet. There was no literary value of such interviews; there was perhaps only a desire to tell the readers an interesting story. Just as the men from some television channel had one day descended on his village in a jeep. Of course, one good thing was that they had brought with them a young lecturer of literature to interview him. A crowd gathered around them when they got down from the vehicle. And Devnath suddenly came to be looked upon with added respect

by the village folk. The producer, the cameraman and the sound recordist took over his house. When Devnath wanted to wear some proper clothes before facing the camera, they advised him against it; they said that the film would be a candid one - just the way things are.

Devnath had no interest in the film. But a few days earlier, a representative of a particular channel had presented him with three bottles of India-made foreign liquor and coaxed him to agree to the interview. The young lecturer asked him a lot of questions related to literature, like what he understood by beauty; what were the three promises of love that he had mentioned in one of his poems; would it not be better if the last line was deleted from one particular poem of his; and so on. Devnath didn't have answers to these questions, but they videographed him all the time as he kept stammering and mumbling meaninglessly. When they took him to the booze shop, Devnath understood that their intention was to film him in his natural state. The producer told him to sit on the bench and continue drinking while talking to the young lecturer, and forget the presence of the camera.

After drinking a glass and a half, Devnath indeed forgot that he was the victim of an intruding camera. The lecturer was a quiet man with a love for literature, and he had read all the poems by Devnath. He wanted Devnath to return to his active, creative days and write more poems. He recited a few old poems of Devnath from memory and brought out many deep meanings from them. He said he wanted to call the documentary 'Long Live the Poet' and that he would end the film with the hope that Devnath would have a long life to serve Goddess Saraswati.

An intoxicated Devnath didn't have even an iota of interest left in the goings-on. He stopped talking to the lecturer and concentrated on his drinking. The producer told him that they would now photograph him falling from the bench to the ground. Devnath was enraged on hearing this and said that he would have nothing more to do with them. The producer reminded him of his contract; Devnath retorted in

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an even higher pitch. Some people gathered around them. The producer provoked him again and again. The camera was on all the time and Devnath understood that they wanted to film him in that agitated state. Hence, he sat down on the bench quietly. The television crew packed up and prepared to leave. The producer came and thanked Devnath smilingly and bade goodbye. The lecturer once again requested him to write poetry and while taking leave, raised his hand in a theatrical flourish to say, 'Long live poetry!'

They all talked to him about his poetry as if he did not exist beyond his writing; he was nothing if not a poet. Of all his acquaintances, only Kusum did not have any interest in poetry. Perhaps she was disinterested in literature. One morning Kusum came to his house all alone, after Basanti had left. The boy who cooked for Devnath was there. Without bothering Devnath, she made a survey of all the rooms and said, 'How can you live like this! Please move a bit and let me set things in order.' She then went to the kitchen and helped the boy in cooking. Devnath could not decide whether he should thank her or scold her. Ultimately, he lay on the bed quietly and read a book until Kusum left after organising the rooms and upbraiding the servant.

Kusum kept coming at intervals after that even though Devnath spoke little and showed no interest in her. Once when Devnath was sick, Kusum took leave from her office and stayed the whole day to look after him. Devnath bore these excesses, but when Kusum said in the evening that she would stay for the night, Devnath refused firmly. However, Kusum made sure before leaving that the servant boy stayed with Devnath at night.

When he thought of the past, Devnath had no complaints about his life. These days there was no office. Rice and pulses came from the village. It was not difficult to run a one-man household. The pension took care of his drinks and the household expenses. He also wrote a song or two at intervals, whether he liked it himself or not, and got paid. When he received requests to write songs, he didn't bother

whether they were decent or not or where the song would be used. He also got offers to write dialogues for films. Devnath knew that there was still some spark in his pen for which people sought him, even though he was dead as a poet.

The first hitch in his easygoing life came when the landlord asked him to vacate the rented house. Devnath had been staying in the house ever since he had joined service and even though the rent had been hiked at intervals, it was still quite low. Rents of houses had increased everywhere and it was not possible for Devnath to take another house. Besides, there was little possibility of an out-of-job, wayward drunkard finding a house on rent. For some time, he ignored the landlord saying that he was looking for a house and would vacate as soon as he got it. He didn't make any effort to search another and the landlord mounted pressure on him. As luck would have it, Devnath's old father passed away in the village at this time, putting an end to his worries.

Devnath was the eldest son of his parents. His brothers and sisters respected him and had maintained an even closer relationship with him when he became famous as a poet and lyricist. They had also distanced themselves from him when Devnath went downhill. Their relationship had come down to a mere exchange of letters at intervals and invitations to family functions. Devnath didn't visit them nor did he attend any family function. They too seemed happy about it. After the death of their father, the brothers got together in the village and proposed that Devnath should return to the village to look after their house and land.

Kusum was yet another problem for Devnath. Even though he had never shown any love and affection towards her own, she had somehow taken him under her wing. She was a nice girl who looked after him well, and Devnath's friends advised him seriously, not in jest, to marry the girl. Devnath laughed it off. How could he marry at his age and in his condition! Kusum had never broached the topic or even winted at it. She seemed to be satisfied with showering her love on him and taking care of him without expecting anything in return.

Devnath liked the girl, but had no other thoughts beyond that. When one day Kusum got married and left the town, Devnath remained sad for a few days. Then he told himself, 'It's all for the good. Be happy, Kusum.'

Devnath felt even lighter in heart once he took the decision to return to the village. His life had been spent in town since his school days. But only a small fraction of his life had been involved with the town. His life in the city was limited to staying in a particular area and spending time with a limited number of friends. Now he would move to the open environs of the village. When he thought of the village, he formed a picture of an easy, simple, beautiful, idyllic life. Poetry's village. The village portrayed by Sachi Routray in his poem on his small village and by Jibanananda Das in Rupasi Bangla.

But when he reached there he found it was far from his imagined village. In the summer, the village looked extremely harsh and unattractive; it became muddy and dirty during the rains. People talked to him only about money and landed property. He had to give a detailed account to everyone on how much he earned, how much he harvested from his land and who would own his house after his death. Because of that, he gradually severed his relationship with the people in the village. His world became even more confined to the family of Hari Master and the liquor shop. His only contact with the outside world was the bank where he went to collect his pension and to drop an occasional letter in the post.

The village folk kept nagging him as to when the documentary on him would be telecast. Devnath didn't have an answer. One day, he received a letter from the lecturer: Dear Poet, I am pained to inform you that the documentary on you with which I was associated has met an untimely death. My question and answer session with you has been completely deleted from the film they have made. It's also a matter of regret that instead of showing it under the literary magazine section they plan to show it under a programme called 'social evils.' Hence, I have decided not to cooperate with the producer of the film. I think you too should also

totally dissociate yourself from them. But you must continue writing, and I pray that Goddess Saraswati would continue to shower her blessings on you. 'Long live poetry!'

Devnath read that letter as disinterestedly as he had read Kusum's letter received a long time back. There was no point any more in furthering any relationship, or any activity in life. He must only think of spending the rest of his life without physical, psychological and financial problems. The rest of the time could be easily spent in the small world of his house, Hari Master and the liquor shop. This was a life outside the society; but so had been his life as a poet.

The sun had gone down. The winter evening was fast spreading on to the grass. He had forgotten to take his lunch today. They must have waited for him for some time in Hari Master's house and given him up. They were extremely nice people. The villagers including his own brothers had tried to poison his mind against Hari Master. 'Hari Master,' they said, 'had an eye on his property.' Devnath listened to them but remained quiet. Why should he try to explain to anyone that the love he received from them would keep him indebted to them for ever? Let them think what they like; let them say what they want. He had no complaints against anything or anyone. He had wanted the reclusive life of a poet and he had got it. He had given up on everything else consciously.

Kusum had written: I am writing my first letter to you as your memory has been bothering me a lot today. My son is growing up and my family life is fine. But I think of you often. And, would you believe, if ever you ask me to come to you, I will leave everything that very moment and come running back to you.'

Devnath stood up to go home. He could see his friendly rickshaw beyond the boundary of the shop. He would return home now. He no longer had with him any song or poem or words or tunes. They had all been left behind. But the special world of poetry that he had once created for himself was left with him. And he knew that he would be able to spend the rest of his life happily within that limited world.

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**J.P. (Jagannath Prasad) Das** (b. 1936), poet, playwright, fiction writer and art historian, did his Masters from Allahabad University and Ph D from Sambalpur University. He was a member of the Indian Administrative Service but left it to devote himself to full time research and writing.

He has published eleven volumes of poetry, eight collections of short stories, a novel and five plays, besides a number of books for children. His works have been widely translated into English, Hindi and other Indian languages. He is a recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Saraswati Samman.

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Design: Biplab Kundu